

"WE ASK OF YOU - ENLIGHTENMENT,
VISION,
ILLUMINATION."

John Fitzgerald Kennedy



Trinity College Washington, D.C.

Commencement Address given at Trinity College by

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as Senator from Massachusetts on June 2, 1958.

Politics . . . has become one of our most neglected, our most abused, and our most ignored professions In the midst of all the pleas, plans, and pressures that urge a career upon you, few, I dare say, if any, will be urging upon you a career in the field of politics. Some will point out the advantages of civil service positions. Others will talk in high terms of public service, or statesmanship, or community leadership. But few, if any, will urge you to become politicians.

Unfortunately, this disdain for the political profession is not only shared but intensified in our academic institutions. For both teachers and students find it difficult to accept the differences between the laboratory and the legislature. In the former, the goal is truth, pure and simple, without regard to changing currents of public opinion; in the latter, compromises and majorities and procedural customs and rights affect the ultimate decision as to what is possible. . . . And so the worlds of practical politics and academic scholarship have drifted far apart. . . .



But this mutual suspicion was not always the case, and I would ask those of you who look with disdain and disfavor upon the possibilities of a political career to remember that our nation's first great politicians were traditionally our ablest, most respected, most talented leaders, men who moved from one field to

another with amazing versatility and vitality. A contemporary described Thomas Jefferson as a 'gentleman of thirty-two, who could calculate an eclipse, survey an estate, tie an artery, plan an edifice, try a cause, break a horse, dance a minuet, and play the violin.'

John Quincy Adams, after being summarily dismissed from the Senate for a notable display of independence, could become Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard and then

become a great Secretary of State. . . . Daniel Webster could throw thunderbolts at Hayne on the Senate Floor and then stroll a few steps down the corridor and dominate the Supreme Court as the foremost lawyer of his time.

This link between American scholarship and the American politician remained for more than a century. A little more than one hundred years ago, in the presidential campaign of 1856, the Republicans sent three brilliant orators around the campaign circuit; William Cullen Bryant, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

I would urge therefore that each of you, regardless of your chosen occupation, consider entering the field of politics at some stage in your career.

All kinds of professions have been represented in our political leaders. A member of Congress from the Michigan Territory in 1823 was the eloquent and hard-working Father Gabriel Richard, a Sulpician priest from Detroit. Certainly both sexes have been well represented. Our political leaders must be drawn from the ranks of our most capable, dedicated citizens, regardless of sex.

It is not necessary that you be famous, that you effect radical changes in the government, or that you are acclaimed by the public for your efforts. It is not even necessary that you be successful.

I ask only that you offer to the political arena, and to the critical problems of our society which are decided therein, the benefit of the talents which society has helped to develop in you. . . . The question now is. . . whether you are to give to the world in which you were reared and educated the broadest possible benefits of that education.

It is not enough to lend your talents to merely discussing the issues and deploring their solutions. Most scholars, I know, would prefer to confine their attentions to the mysteries of pure scholarship or the delights of abstract discourse. But 'would you have counted him a friend of Ancient Greece,' as George William Curtis asked a century ago in the Kansas - Nebraska Controversy, 'who quietly discussed the theory of patriotism on that Greek summer day through whose hopeless and immortal hours Leonidas and his three hundred stood at Thermopylae for liberty?'

This is a great institution of learning, Trinity College. Its establishment and continued functioning, like that of all great colleges and universities, has required considerable effort and expenditure. I cannot believe that all of this was undertaken merely to give the school's graduates an economic advantage in the life struggle. 'A



university,' said Professor Woodrow Wilson, 'should be an organ of memory for the state for the transmission of its best traditions. Every man sent out from a university should be a man of his nation, as well as a man of his time.' . . .

If you are to be among the rulers of our land, if you are willing to enter the abused and neglected profession of politics, then let me tell you -- as one who is familiar with the political world -- that we stand in serious need of the fruits of your education. . . . We need . . . men and women who can ride easily over broad fields of knowledge and recognize the mutual dependence of the two worlds of politics and scholarship.

I strongly urge the application of your talents to the public solution of great problems of our time . . . above all, the knotty, complex problems of war and peace, . . . of preventing man's destruction of man by nuclear war, or, even more awful to contemplate, by disabling through mutation generations yet unborn.

No public leader need apologize for a religious education such as you have received, for religion is at the essence of our present world struggle. The Communist leaders do not fear the phraseology of religion, or the ceremonies and churches and denominational organizations What they fear is the profound consequences of a religion that is lived and not merely acknowledged. . . . There is room in a totalitarian system for churches, but there is no room for God. The claim of the State must be total, and no other loyalty and no other philosophy of life can be tolerated; and our nation needs leaders who can penetrate that weakness by their own lives and philosophy.

No, you do not lack problems or opportunities, you do not lack the ability or the energy; nor, I have tried to say, do you lack the responsibility to act, no matter what you have heard about the profession of politics. We ask of you enlightenment, vision, illumination.