THOUGHTS ON OUR PRESENT DISCONTENTS

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It is good to be with you today and, to me, something of a surprise. For soon after I accepted the generous invitation of your president, it did not seem that I would manage to get here. That it turned out otherwise, I owe entirely to the compassionate, marvelously inventive and life-saving hands of my surgeon, Hollon Farr. There is, incidentally, nothing quite like a massive intimation of mortality for achieving a deepened sense of concern with the world to which one returns and a deepened sense, too, of detachment from it. In a way, that is one of the themes I want to put before you this afternoon: the profound need, in these harsh and strenuous times, for the exercise of both compassionate involvement and rational detachment in dealing with our public troubles. Concern without rationality is inept sentimentalism; rationality without concern, callous manipulation. Now, perhaps more than before, we have an urgent need for both compassion and reason.

Ponder for a moment this innocent-sounding phrase, "now, more than before." Comparing present and past, it hints at an historical perspective. Yet for many, ours has become an age which is ahistorical, if not downright anti-historical. Even the immediate past is pushed out of mind. To many, the Korean War and its aftermath in Joe McCarthyism are barely known. The eruption of Hitlerism and the tyranny of Stalinism are assigned to a medieval past while the Great Depression and the first
World War are placed in a remote and irrelevant antiquity. Only the immediate present and the pending future comprise the significant reality.

The emergence of this limited time-perspective was foreseen, soon after the turn of the century, by the historian, Henry Adams. He noted the increasing rate of technological and social change and prophesied, according to what he called the "Law of Acceleration," that for an American living in the year 2000 -- and by that he meant, of course, not me but you, in your middle age -- that for an American living in the year 2000; "the 19th century would stand on the same plane with the 4th century -- equally childlike -- and he would only wonder how both of them, knowing so little, and so weak in force should have done so much."

Yet, deep in our bones, all of us -- even those who would abandon historical perspective -- know better. We know that our age of discontent is not unique. We know that many times before us have witnessed failures of nerve, deep crises of confidence and conditions of anomie. We have only to listen to what sounds like a diagnosis of our own hard times:

...the government is at once dreaded and contemned; the laws are despoiled of their respect and salutary terrors; their inaction is a subject of ridicule, and their exertion of abhorrence; rank, and office, and title, and all the solemn plausibilities of the world, have lost their reverence and effect; our foreign politics are as much deranged as our domestic economy;... we know neither how to yield nor how to enforce; hardly anything above or below, abroad or at home, is sound and entire; disconnection and confusion, in offices, in parties, in families,.. in the nation, prevail beyond the disorders of any former time: these are facts universally admitted and lamented.
Only the stately and faintly archaic language signals us that this is not really a description of America in 1970 but one of England in 1770, as set out by Edmund Burke in his "Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents."

Burke thus bears witness that our present discontents are new only in scope and detail, not in kind. It would only be tedious to list the familiar inventory of the discontents shared in some measure by Americans of every type and station. Listed in all detail, that inventory would be enough to occupy all the columns of all the editions of the New York Times for a thirty-one-day month. Still, some reminders are in order for us this day.

Above all else in urgency is the immoral and undeclared war in Southeast Asia, destructive of all values except the spurious one of saving face. Even now, the historical record shows that this war without commitment was continuously recognized as a cumulative disaster. As early as 1962, before any American combat troops were in Vietnam, Averell Harriman and John Gilbraith sent a memorandum to President Kennedy urging him to cut back our "growing military commitment" which, they prophetically observed, "could expand step by step into a major, long drawn-out, indecisive military involvement" with "the consequent danger [that] we shall replace the French as the colonial force in the area and bleed as the French bled." Reason and compassion spoke in a united voice but, as we have cause to know, they did not prevail. I draw upon only one other instance anticipating the cumulative nature of the Vietnam disaster, this one not because of its importance but because I know it well.
In the middle of the 1960s, when the polls were still showing the great majority of American students in support of the war, ten of us on the Columbia faculty were in private correspondence with President Johnson stating the case for his adopting a policy of "painful candor" which would halt all buildup of troops in Vietnam and indicating, step by step, the reversibility of the war toward an early negotiated peace. But this president too listened to his military advisers engaged in announcing brilliant successes and impending victory.

As a violation of the public conscience, the war in Southeast Asia may be the ongoing event that has triggered our discontents. Even so, it has been only the immediate occasion. Profoundly underlying all else, I believe, is the centuries-long immorality of the cruel, coarse and ugly subordination of the Negro in American society. The troubled conscience of dominant whites and the deep-rooted resentment of dominated blacks have been gathering force for generations. But only now have these discontents coalesced into irreversible action for changing the institutions of our society that have allowed these unprincipled inequities to persist.

All other social movements in our unquiet times -- to a degree, abroad as well as at home -- have drawn inspiration and example from the various Black movements as prototypes. The movements against poverty, the variety of student movements, the reactivated women's movements, the movements for restoring our polluted environments of air, water, earth and sound -- all these and more have been energized by the discontents centered on the abolition of racism.
Yet all this confronts us with a question, not an answer. What accounts for the multitudinous expression of discontent in the tumultuous 'sixties in contrast to the almost silent 'fifties? After all, the 1950s had its war too. Nor was it a small one. The three years of the Korean War resulted in a million and a half casualties among United Nations forces and another two million among Chinese and North Korean forces (with more than a million civilians being killed by the way). More than 54,000 Americans were killed in those three years compared with the 43,000 killed in the eight years of the present war. And yet it did not lead to that erosion of public trust in our governors which has occurred in this past decade of an undeclared war without moral commitment.

What else has evoked our present discontents? Have things actually worsened so much in the past decade? Has racial discrimination drastically expanded, has poverty deepened, have women been more downgraded and students increasingly prevented from speaking their mind and taking action? To ask the question is almost to answer it. By almost every available indicator, which I do not try to itemize here, discrimination and inequalities have remained much the same or actually lessened.

It is not, I venture to suggest, a newly acute deterioration in the structure and practices of our society which is producing our present discontents. Rather, it is the emergence of a new sensibility. Having raised our sights and moral expectations, we become more sensitive to the long-existing inequities in our society and to its imperfectly realized potentials for a humane life. In growing numbers, we Americans direct our critical attention to the weaknesses of our society just as we have long directed our admiring attention to its strengths. In this process of collective self-scrutiny, the more we demand of our society,
the more faults we naturally find. And we are becoming an exceedingly 
demanding people and a self-critical society. What was good enough before, 
in the form of convenient compromise with principle, is no longer judged 
good enough today. New priorities of values are in the making. More and 
more Americans, even some of those in the halls of Congress, are stirring 
themselves out of a complacency induced by the fat and prosperous years 
to ask the harder questions: affluence for what? for whom? and what beyond 
affluence?

For all its inevitable errors and evitable excesses, about which 
I shall have something to say in a moment, the new sensibility entails an 
enlarged sense of collective responsibility for what takes place in society. 
Above all else, it exacts increasing accountability. It requires a public 
accounting by those who govern our organizations and direct our institutions, 
for it takes with a new seriousness the old idea that every private enterprise 
is invested with a public interest. Organizations in every sphere -- business 
and religion, education and politics, science and technology -- are being 
held accountable for acts of commission and omission to a degree not 
known before. And at least the most authentic exponents of the new 
sensibility know that this cuts both ways: that they, the public critics, are 
also to be held accountable for their acts of commission and omission. They 
do not ask for a double standard in which the others are to be held to the 
standards of a moral discipline while they shall allow themselves to escape 
accountability.

It is no easy matter to fathom what has made for this new 
sensibility. At least two major and related processes seem to have
contributed greatly to it: the vast expansion of technological capacity and
the vast expansion of higher education. (I shall have only a little to say
about the first and somewhat more about the second.) In a sense which
is dimly felt rather than precisely measured, the growth in our ever-
expanding technological capabilities is outrunning the growth in our achieve-
ment of a humane life. The enlargement of technical capacity often seems
only to widen the gulf between what we can do and what we in fact do. It
often provides only vastly improved means to progressively trivial ends.
The gulf between the newly possible and the actual makes for collective
discontent. That perhaps is the parable we should read in the popular
ambivalence so often expressed toward the historic moon-walk: collective
pride in the accomplishment mingled with collective irritation that the same
magnitude of resources and organized talent are not put to effective use to solve problems here on earth.

As an expanding technology contributes to our discontent by
enlarging our sense of what could be, vastly expanding higher education,
with all its manifest deficiencies, contributes by enlarging our sense of
what should be. Colleges and universities have long been both transmitters
and critics of intellectual traditions and cultural values. They have made for
both continuity and change. But now, apparently for the first time, the scale
of mass higher education has reached a critical mass which makes the
decisive difference. We now have more than seven million college students
in this country alone. We are approaching the point where almost half the
youth of college age are in college. These and the growing millions of their
counterparts around the world are in part a response to the technical needs
of increasingly complex societies. But in another part, they are not so much
trained servants of the society as it is but educated critics concerned with society as it should be. And as the millions of student cumulate into tens of millions of graduates, many of them endowed with this new humane orientation, they become the instruments of profound institutional change.

I have suggested that the core of ideas and values in the new sensibility are anything but new. The attack on that composite of race prejudice and race discrimination known as racism was mounted decades ago (and, may I say without undue trade-union chauvinism, mounted principally by sociologists and anthropologists investigating the myths of racism). For decades, scientists have worked to find out the ecological consequences of technology and have shown how it often disrupts entire ecosystems. But in terms of a large-scale concern, these and kindred ideas remained ideas whose time had not yet come.

The scope and intensity of collective action were not yet enough to realize the number of required changes. Their time had not yet come in part because those being educated in this knowledge and perspective was still too small to exert a preponderating influence and because so many of them were reaching out principally to better their own economic and social condition. It had not yet reached a critical mass (in the double sense of the term). But with the growth in numbers of the comparatively well-to-do -- not to say, opulent -- strata, more and more of their children have concluded that access to a high material plane of living is just not enough. In this, they are beginning to bear a family resemblance to the occasional scions of the very rich who find a life devoted to accumulating more riches simply dull and turn their energies instead to public service. Able to afford the new sensibility, they are ready to work
for the revamping of institutions that will more fully incorporate values they can respect.

And so there appears the now familiar phenomenon: unpatronizing sons and daughters of the middle class seeking to identify themselves with the dispossessed. Often, this is registered by affiliative symbols of speech, appearance and dress, from the use of vernacular believed to be indigenous to the poor and extending to the uniform of blue denim, lavishly streaked with paint and laboriously worn through at the knees. These symbols are no occasion for frivolous satire. They often express feelings that run deep, feelings of identification with those victimized by the social system.

To the distant outsider, the new sensibles are easily confused with the small number of the new irresponsibles. But there is a great difference between them, all the difference that matters. The new sensibles know that ends are inseparable from the means adopted to achieve them. They know that corrupt means corrupt idealistic ends. They know, too, that extremists of the right and extremists of the left in effect join forces in an interactive cycle of destructiveness by adopting the doctrine and the practice of 'anything goes.' They know that those who would maintain our institutions unchanged 'at any cost' are of a kind with those who would destroy these institutions 'at any cost.'

The new sensibles are radical in the strict sense of trying to get to the roots of our public troubles, of trying to get down to fundamentals. But again, this authentic humane commitment has nothing to do with the self-described idealists on the fringe, who only exhibit in themselves what they condemn in others. These are the
irresponsibles in every aspect. Demanding accountability from others, they refuse to be held accountable for their own behavior, either individual or collective. For the old irresponsibility of laissez faire, they propose to substitute the new irresponsibility of nihilism. Exercising their right to dissent, they deny others the opportunity to dissent from them, imposing instead the tyranny of the crowd, with hectoring taunts drowning out authentic dialogue. Ostensibly concerned to do away with the vicious epithets of race and religion, they invent a vocabulary of hate all their own. Protesting violence abroad and at home, they take pride in their own violence, on and off campus. Opposing racism and sexism, they manage to create a doctrine of agism which pits the generations against one another. The unattractive self-righteousness of some of the old they replace by an unattractive self-righteousness of the young. Given to extremes, they would replace gerontocracy by juvenocracy, rule by the very old with rule by the very young, unmindful that young and old, black and white, we are all in this together.

(At this moment, I am mindful of two things: that I have overrun my time this afternoon and that Thomas Jefferson had some apt advice: "...nothing is more incumbent on the old [he wrote] than to know when they should get out of the way and relinquish to younger successors the honors they can no longer earn, and the duties they can no longer perform." I thought this a splendid idea when I came upon it back in 1950 but for some strange reason, as I stand here today, it seems somewhat less persuasive.)
You of the graduating class can aptly say, in paraphrase of Eliot's Thomas Becket: "...four years is no brevity, we shall not get these four years back again." And an occasion celebrating these years in your lives clearly calls for a peroration. Here, then, is mine. It is for us all to recognize the profound difference between the new sensibility, which is our hope, and the new irresponsibility, which is our burden. Possessed by a belief in inevitable progress, we Americans have long been a nation of pollyannas; we need not now become a nation of Cassandras. We need not oscillate between an irrepressible optimism and an irrepressible pessimism. Other options for raising the quality of civil life are open to us. And chief among these is the option provided by the authentic new sensibility: the option of being humane in our commitments, critical in our judgments and compassionate in our practices. May we all exercise that option for the rest of our days.