

## **Kennedy at Amherst, Service, Frost and the Liberal Arts**

At first reading, Kennedy's Amherst Convocation address is two in one. He begins by calling attention to graduates of the College who have done distinguished public service, calls current students to follow their lead, and reminds them that their privileged position as highly educated Americans implies the responsibility of civic engagement.

Only then does Kennedy turn to a reflection on Robert Frost. He paints Frost in heroic terms, as a contributor to the spirit, insight, and self-comprehension of America. He then develops a definition of the artist as guardian of the nation's conscience. He argues, " ...art established the basic human truths which must serve as the touchstone of our judgment." To serve the nation in this way, the artist must be "free to follow his vision," even if the vision is critical of current practice. Where a nation "disdains the mission of art, [it] invites the fate of Robert Frost's hired man, the fate of having nothing to look backward to with pride and nothing to look forward to with hope."

The speech ends with a litany of hopes for America in which military strength, wealth, and power are balanced by moral restraint, wisdom, purpose, and beauty. He hopes the nation will "command respect...not only for its strength, but for its civilization as well." He commends both Frost and the College for helping to increase humanity's "hold on the planet."

While Kennedy does not link the two parts of his address together rigorously, the juxtaposition and conclusion implies an interaction. If the public interest is to be served, those who pursue public service must be open to currents of thought beyond those required to accumulate power and wealth. They must be as fluent in the arts, humanities, and pure science as in business and technology, as articulate regarding ends as they are means.

In other words, Kennedy implies that the type of education that institutions like Amherst are providing have particular relevance to government because their liberal arts curricula gives students a wide appreciation of culture as well as tutors an inquisitive mind. Given that only a limited number of students are being provided such an education, it is particularly important that those who are so privileged use their gifts in the service of their country. He notes, "The problems which this country now face are staggering." Only when leaders appreciate that true art "is not a form of propaganda; it is a form of truth, " can they be protected from the narrowness, arrogance, and corruption of power, by artists who are particularly sensitive to where "our nation falls short of its highest potential. "

If this reading of the Kennedy speech is fair, then the unifying theme is how students educated in the liberal arts are invaluable as public servants because they understand the "truths" of the arts and humanities as well as practical sciences.

They are protected against the corruptions of wealth and power by the poets that they have learned to read as undergraduates. In fact, the great fear is that liberal arts students will take the critical edge of artists so seriously that they will turn away from the public square in light of its excesses. (This reality may be in part the reason Plato feared poets). Hence, Kennedy feels it is worth his time to come to Amherst to recruit the liberally educated and to remind them of their responsibilities to the public interest even if the world of politics and power can be a moral challenge. It is precisely because Amherst students appreciate Robert Frost that they could and should become engaged in public life.

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