

Commencement Address at San Diego State College

President John F. Kennedy

June 6, 1963

President Love, Governor Brown, Chairman Heilbron, trustees, fellow graduates, ladies and gentlemen:

I want to express a very warm sense of appreciation for the honor that you have given to me today, to be an instant graduate of this distinguished college. It is greatly appreciated and I am delighted to participate in what is a most important ceremony in the lives of us all.

One of the most impressive, if not the most impressive, accomplishment of this great Golden State has been the recognition by the citizens of this State of the importance of education as the basis for the maintenance of an effective, free society. This fact was recognized in our earliest beginnings at the Massachusetts Bay Colony, but I do not believe that any State in the Union has given more attention in recent years to educating its citizens to the highest level, doctoral level, in the State colleges, the junior colleges, the high schools, the grade schools. You recognize that a free society places special burdens upon any free citizen. To govern is to choose and the ability to make those choices wise and responsible and prudent requires the best of all of us.

No country can possibly move ahead, no free society can possibly be sustained, unless it has an educated citizenry whose qualities of mind and heart permit it to take part in the complicated and increasingly sophisticated decisions that pour not only upon the President and upon the Congress, but upon all the citizens who exercise the ultimate power.

I am sure that the graduates of this College recognize that the effort of the people of California-- the Governor, the legislature, the local communities, the faculty--that this concentrated effort of mind and scholarship to educate the young citizens of this State has not been done merely to give this school's graduates an economic advantage in the life struggle. Quite obviously, there is a higher purpose, and that is the hope that you will turn to the service of the State, the scholarship, the education, the qualities which society has helped develop in you; that you will render on the community level, or on the State level, or on the national level, or the international level a contribution to the maintenance of freedom and peace and the security of our country and those associated with it in a most critical time.

In so doing, you will follow a great and honorable tradition which combined American scholarship and American leadership in political affairs. It is an extraordinary fact of history, I think, unmatched since the days of early Greece, that this country should have produced during its rounding days in a population of a handful of men such an extraordinary range of scholars and creative thinkers who helped build this country--Jefferson, Franklin, Morris, Wilson, and all

the rest. This is a great tradition which we must maintain in our time with increasing strength and increasing vigor.

Those of you who are educated, those of us who recognize the responsibilities of an educated citizen, should now concern ourselves with whether we are providing an adequate education for all Americans, whether all Americans have an equal chance to develop their intellectual qualities, and

whether we are preparing ourselves today for the educational challenges which are going to come before this decade is out.

The first question, and the most important—does every American boy and girl have an opportunity to develop whatever talents they have? All of us do not have equal talent, but all of us should have an equal opportunity to develop those talents. Let me cite a few facts to show that they do not.

In this fortunate State of California the average current expenditure for a boy and girl in the public schools is \$515, but in the State of Mississippi it is \$230. The average salary for classroom teachers in California is \$7,000, while in Mississippi it is \$3,600. Nearly three-quarters of the young, white population of the United States have graduated from high school, but only about two-fifths of our nonwhite population has done the same. In some States almost 40 percent of the nonwhite population has completed less than 5 years of school. Contrast it with 7 percent of the white population. In one American State, over 36 percent of the public school buildings are over 40 years of age. In another, only 4 percent are that old.

Such facts, and one could prolong the recital indefinitely, make it clear that American children today do not yet enjoy equal educational opportunities for two primary reasons: one is economic and the other is racial. If our Nation is to meet the goal of giving every American child a fair chance, because an uneducated child makes an uneducated parent who, in many cases, produces another uneducated child, we must move ahead swiftly in both areas. And we must recognize that segregation and education, and I mean de facto segregation in the North as well as the proclaimed segregation in the South, brings with it serious handicaps to a large proportion of the population. It does no good, as you in California know better than any, to say that that is the business of another State. It is the business of our country, and in addition, these young uneducated boys and girls know no State boundaries and they come West as well as North and East, and they are your citizens as well as citizens of this country.

The second question relates to the quality of our education. Today 1 out of every 3 students in the fifth grade will drop out of high school, and only 2 out of 10 will graduate from college. In the meantime we need more educated men and women, and we need less and less unskilled labor. There are millions of jobs that will be available in the next 7 years for educated young men and women. The demand will be overwhelming, and there will be millions of people out of work who are unskilled because with new machines and technology there is less need for them. This combination of a tremendously increasing population among our young people, of less

need for unskilled labor, of increasingly unskilled labor available, combines to form one of the most serious domestic problems that this country will face in the next 10 years.

Of Americans 18 years of age or older, more than 23 million have less than 8 years of schooling, and over 8 million have less than 5 years. What kind of judgment, what kind of response can we expect of a citizen who has been to school less than 5 years? And we have in this country 8 million who have been to school less than 5 years. As a result, they can't read or write or do simple arithmetic. They are illiterate in this rich country of ours, and they constitute the hard core of our unemployed. They can't write a letter to get a job, and they can't read, in many cases, a help-wanted sign. One out of every 10 workers who failed to finish elementary school are unemployed, as compared to 1 out of 50 college graduates.

In short, our current educational programs, much as they represent a burden upon the taxpayers of this country, do not meet the responsibility. The fact of the matter is that this is a problem which faces us all, no matter where we live, no matter what our political views must be. "Knowledge is power," as Francis Bacon said 500 years ago, and today it is truer than it ever was.

What are we going to do by the end of this decade? There are 4 million boys and girls born each year in the United States. Our population is growing each decade by a figure equal to the total population of this country at the time of Abraham Lincoln just 100 years ago. Our educational system is not expanding fast enough. By 1970 the number of students in our public, elementary, and secondary schools will have increased 25 percent over 1960. Nearly three-quarters of a million new classrooms will be needed, and we are not building them at that rate. By 1970 we will have 7 million students in our colleges and universities, 3 million more than we do today. We are going to double the population of our colleges and universities in 10 years. We are going to have to build as many school and college classrooms and buildings in 10 years as we did in 150 years.

By 1970 we will need 7,500 Ph. D.'s each year in the physical sciences, mathematics, and engineering. In 1960 we graduated 3,000. Such facts make it clear that we have a major responsibility and a major opportunity, one that we should welcome, because there is no greater asset in this country than an educated man or woman. Education, quite rightly, is the responsibility of the State and the local community, but from the beginning of our country's history, from the time of the Northwest Ordinance, as John Adams and Thomas Jefferson recognized, from the time of the Morrill Act at the height of the Civil War, when the land grant college system was set up under the administration of President Lincoln, from the beginning it has been recognized that there must be a national commitment and that the National Government must play its role in stimulating a system of excellence which can serve the great national purpose of a free society. And it is for that reason that we have sent to the Congress of the United States legislation to help meet the needs of higher education, by assisting in the construction of college academic facilities, and junior colleges and graduate centers, and

technical institutes, and by stepping up existing programs for student loans and graduate fellowships and other student assistance programs.

We have to improve, and we have so recommended, the quality of our teachers by expanding teacher training institutes, by improving teacher preparation programs, by broadening educational research and by authorizing--and this is one of our greatest needs--increased training for teachers for the handicapped: the deaf, and those who can't speak, and those who are otherwise handicapped. And it is designed to strengthen public elementary and secondary education through grants to the States for better teachers' salaries, to relieve critical classroom shortages, to meet the special educational problems of depressed areas, and to continue and expand vocational education and counseling.

And finally, we must make a massive attack upon illiteracy in the year 1963 in the United States by an expansion of university extension courses and by a major effort to improve our libraries in every community of our country.

I recognize that this represents a difficult assignment for us all, but I don't think it is an assignment from which we should shrink. I believe that education comes at the top of the responsibilities of any government, at whatever level. It is essential to our survival as a Nation in a dangerous and

hazardous world, and it is essential to the maintenance of freedom at a time when freedom is under attack.

I have traveled in the last 24 hours from Washington to Colorado to Texas to here, and on every street I see mothers standing with two or three or four children. They are going to pour into our schools and our colleges in the next 10 or 20 years and I want this generation of Americans to be as prepared to meet this challenge as our forefathers did in making it possible for all of us to be here today. We are the privileged, and it should be the ambition of every citizen to express and expand that privilege so that all of our countrymen and women share it. Thank you.

Note: The President spoke after receiving the first honorary degree conferred by San Diego State College-- a doctorate of laws. His opening words referred to Dr. Malcolm A. Love, president of the college; Governor Edmund G. Brown of California; and Louis H. Heilbron, chairman of the college's board of trustees.

Citation: John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, The American Presidency Project [online]. Santa Barbara, CA. Available from the World Wide Web: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=9259>