

Normally at this time I would have a few words for our graduates. But for today I decided that with Minority Leader Schumer, former Mayor David Dinkins and Chairman McCall present, it would be appropriate to hear from an even higher authority, so I have decided to turn to the White House for advice.

On May 18, 1963, 54 years ago almost to the day, President John F. Kennedy addressed the students and faculty of Vanderbilt University. In these difficult times where we continue to face issues of racial discrimination, as well as discrimination based upon sexual orientation, ethnic disability and now religion and country of origin, I found President Kennedy's words to be particularly relevant. President Kennedy addressed, in part, the obligations of an educated citizen. You are educated citizens. I believe what he said 54 years ago, six months before his assassination, is just as relevant to Purchase College students now as it was to Vanderbilt students then.

Please listen to these excerpts from his speech. The full text and audio of the speech is available through the JFK Library and on the internet.* I commend it to you.

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This State, this city, this campus, have stood long for both human rights and human enlightenment--and let that forever be true. This Nation is now engaged in a continuing debate about the rights of a portion of its citizens. That will go on, and those rights will expand until the standard first forged by the Nation's founders has been reached, and all Americans enjoy equal opportunity and liberty under law.

But this Nation was not founded solely on the principle of citizens' rights. Equally important, though too often not discussed, is the citizen's responsibility. For our privileges can be no greater than our obligations. The protection of our rights can endure no longer than the performance of our responsibilities. Each can be neglected only at the peril of the other. I speak to you today, therefore, not of your rights as Americans, but of your responsibilities. They are many in number and different in nature. They do not rest

with equal weight upon the shoulders of all. Equality of opportunity does not mean equality of responsibility. All Americans must be responsible citizens, but some must be more responsible than others, by virtue of their public or their private position, their role in the family or community, their prospects for the future, or their legacy from the past.

Increased responsibility goes with increased ability, for "of those to whom much is given, much is required."

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You have responsibilities, in short, to use your talents for the benefit of the society which helped develop those talents. You must decide, as Goethe put it, whether you will be an anvil or a hammer, whether you will give to the world in which you were reared and educated the broadest possible benefits of that education. Of the many special obligations incumbent upon an educated citizen, I would cite three as outstanding: your obligation to the pursuit of learning, your obligation to serve the public, your obligation to uphold the law.

If the pursuit of learning is not defended by the educated citizen, it will not be defended at all. For there will always be those who scoff at intellectuals, who cry out against research, who seek to limit our educational system. Modern cynics and skeptics see no more reason for landing a man on the moon, which we shall do, than the cynics and skeptics of half a millennium ago saw for the discovery of this country. They see no harm in paying those to whom they entrust the minds of their children a smaller wage than is paid to those to whom they entrust the care of their plumbing.

But the educated citizen knows how much more there is to know. He knows that "knowledge is power," more so today than ever before. He knows that only an educated and informed people will be a free people, that the ignorance of one voter in a democracy impairs the security of all, and that if we can, as Jefferson put it, "enlighten the people generally ... tyranny and the oppressions of mind and body will vanish, like evil spirits at the dawn of day." And, therefore, the educated citizen has a special obligation to encourage the pursuit of learning, to promote exploration of the unknown, to preserve the freedom of inquiry, to support the advancement of research, and to assist at every level of government the improvement of education for all Americans, from grade school

to graduate school.

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...The Nation, indeed the whole world, has watched recent events in the United States with alarm and dismay. No one can deny the complexity of the problems involved in assuring to all of our citizens their full rights as Americans. But no one can gainsay the fact that the determination to secure these rights is in the highest traditions of American freedom.

In these moments of tragic disorder, a special burden rests on the educated men and women of our country to reject the temptations of prejudice and violence, and to reaffirm the values of freedom and law on which our free society depends”.

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I ask you to take up those responsibilities. If you sit by the sidelines you are not fulfilling your role as an educated citizen.

Thank you and God Bless You.

Thomas J. Schwarz, President
Purchase College, S.U.N.Y.
May 19, 2017
Purchase College 45th Commencement
Westchester County Center
White Plains, New York

John F. Kennedy, Convocation, Vanderbilt University, May 18, 1963. Nashville, Tn.

****audio link: edited mp3 version under 2017 commencement speech webpage***

Full audio file from JFK library:

https://archive2.jfklibrary.org/JFKWHA/1963/JFKWHA-185-001/JFKWHA-185-001-AUdctm_pm_43475617.mp3