



Department of Justice

ADDRESS

OF

THE HONORABLE GRIFFIN B. BELL
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

AT THE

BERRY COLLEGE COMMENCEMENT

SUNDAY, MAY 28, 1978

MT. BERRY, GEORGIA

Commencement exercises are important events. Regardless of the type of degree you receive, your life will never be the same after today. And it should not be. For, as has been said so many times, added responsibilities come with the knowledge that your degree signifies you have obtained. Ours is a nobless oblige based on merit rather than birth.

I have been interested in higher education for many years, and I am well aware of the high standards and long public service of Berry College.

Some years ago, I practiced law in Rome and was a member of the firm that served as the counsel for the college. I later had the honor to serve as a member of the Board of Visitors at Berry, from 1970 to 1972.

My interest in education has continued. As a trustee of Mercer University, I have learned a great deal about

traditions at many schools. And the more I learn, the more impressed I am with Berry's long devotion to excellence and to the public betterment.

I have mentioned two things -- your added responsibilities as graduates and the idea of this college being here to serve -- that form the theme for what I'll say in the next few minutes: the necessity, and I chose that word carefully, for schools and their graduates to make a contribution to our society. Both must have a deep commitment to that end.

Government service in a high post today is not an easy task, in part because of the incredible turbulence to which the Nation has been subjected over the past 20 years. During that period, our national life has been dominated by three great issues -- the civil rights movement, the Vietnam war, and Watergate.

Each of these great issues left its mark on our nation -- some good and some bad. Because Watergate was the most recent -- and coming in the aftermath of the Vietnam war, in some ways the most traumatic for the Federal government -- I am particularly aware of its effects on almost a daily basis.

In some respects Watergate has been good for our country. The American people recognize that the tragedy occurred in part because of the secrecy in which many important government decisions were made. The veil has been stripped from government, and this is good.

I strive to be as open with the public and the media as possible. Only in this way can the American people be informed about the activities of the Justice Department and about the basis which underlies the actions for which I am responsible. An open government places the American people in a better position to work their will on government, rather than having the government work its will on them.

Another positive side from the turmoil and disappointment of Watergate is that the American people now demand much higher standards of behavior from all government officials. This is evident everywhere in Washington. And I am told that this is true throughout the country in all levels of government.

Many departments and agencies in the Federal government have recently set up offices of internal inspection to investigate any allegations of wrongdoing by their employees. We have such an office at the Department of Justice, established by my predecessor, which reports to me directly. There is also a group of lawyers in the Department who now do nothing but investigate possible violations of federal law by public officials at all levels of government -- federal, state, and local.

These developments are permanent improvements. I do not believe the American people will ever again permit their government servants to abuse the powers with which they have been entrusted.

Some effects of Watergate are unhealthy for our nation, however. I want to discuss a couple of these with you because you can do something about them.

I think the predominant unhealthy effect has been an undue suspicion of government officials.

I began personally to suffer this effect, which I call the "Watergate syndrome," as soon as I arrived in Washington.

I did not have an easy time getting confirmed by the Senate. Some opposed me because I was a friend of the President. Because Watergate showed that some friends of one President exercised poor judgment in public office, these people suspected that I would. Others opposed me because I was a Southerner and was a moderate rather than a liberal on civil rights issues.

Thinking about my confirmation process, and many of the days since then as well, causes a story about Abraham Lincoln to come to mind. When a neighbor back in Illinois asked how it felt to be President, Lincoln is said to have replied: "You've heard about the man who was tarred and feathered and ridden out of town on a rail. A man in the crowd asked him how he liked it, and his reply was if it wasn't for the honor of the thing he would much rather walk."

Suspicion and lack of trust has produced another bad effect: a certain disaffection with government service among young people.

You probably remember a poignant scene on television during the Watergate inquiry. A clean-cut young man who held

a relatively low-level government job was testifying before a Senate Committee. For several hours, he catalogued wrongful acts by government officials who worked around him and described how he had himself eventually become compromised and wound up doing wrong. One Senator hoped to end on a positive note and asked the young man if he had any advice to offer young people who might be interested in entering government service.

"Yes," he said. "Stay away."

The word from the campuses in the last couple of years has been that many in your generation seem to be taking this advice. The media say that students are "turning inward," concerned with establishing their own lives and gaining financial security, little interested in most of the great issues confronting our nation and our government today. Government service may not be attracting the most talented.

I hope that this is wrong and that each of you will consider making certain that it is. I believe you have a duty to take an active part in the issues of the day and to consider government service. Just as many persons feel they owe a tithe on religious grounds, in my view we all owe a tithe of service to our country.

We live in the greatest country on earth. We have more liberty and more opportunity than people anywhere else.

But the bounties of our system are not free. Our system requires that the talented make whatever personal sacrifice is necessary to contribute their time and talents to making the system work. We have never had a hereditary class of government officials. The genius of our system has been that in each generation there have been numbers of men and women from all walks of life who have dedicated at least a portion of their productive lives to the service of their country.

Such service often requires personal sacrifices. The task of governing is difficult, the pressures are great. Family life can suffer and the financial rewards are usually not as great as outside the government. But the satisfactions are lasting. Foremost among them is knowing that you have paid a part of your tithe as a citizen.

But service can be gravely diminished if it is not coupled with firm principles. Let me mention the principles that have guided my efforts as Attorney General.

The first principle is restraint in the use of power. I have long realized, now more clearly than ever, that the wisest exercise of power, more often than not, is not to use it at all. Sometimes, of course, the use of power is necessary. In such cases, the use of power should be as restrained as possible. In the equity sense, the remedy must not exceed the scope of the wrong.

The second principle is fundamental fairness. One adheres to this principle if he or she remembers that everyone is entitled to respect as a human being and should be approached in a spirit of common decency and with a high degree of civility. Rudeness, temper, unfair dealing, and the like have no place in personal dealings either within or outside the government.

The third principle is integrity. This principle is uncommonly hard to explain, but I find its essence may be best captured by the simple phrase "doing what's right." We are each given by our Creator a still, quiet voice inside that says, from time to time, "You ought to do so-and-so."

President Lincoln knew the importance of listening to this voice. At one point in his administration, some powerful political friends urged a particular course upon him that he considered against his conscience. In refusing that course, he made the point this way: "I desire so to conduct the affairs of this administration that if at the end, when I come to lay down the reigns of power, I have lost every other friend on earth, I shall at least have one friend left, and that friend shall be down inside me."

In closing let me again turn to Lincoln, because I think some of the things said about Lincoln represent qualities that everyone should strive to cultivate.

I am referring to a tribute to Lincoln by the great Russian author and philosopher Tolstoy, who was a contemporary of Lincoln. Tolstoy was traveling in the mountains of Russia sometime after Lincoln's death and was the guest of the chief of a remote Russian tribe. The chief and his tribesmen requested that Tolstoy tell them of great statesmen and great generals. Tolstoy at first told them of the Russian czars and about Napoleon. Then the chief rose and begged Tolstoy to tell them

about Lincoln, and promised him the best horse in the tribe's stock if Tolstoy could explain the greatness of Lincoln.

Tolstoy waxed eloquently about the American President, saying that he was greater than Frederick the Great, Napoleon, or Washington. He explained that Lincoln always operated on one motive: the benefit of mankind. He emphasized that Lincoln had wanted to be great through his very smallness. And he explained that all of Lincoln's actions were rooted in four principles -- truth, humanity, justice, and pity. According to Tolstoy, it was these things that would earn Lincoln his preeminent place in history. These great principles -- truth, humanity, justice, and pity -- will stand in good stead a nation or an individual.

To these principles may be added the rules of conduct to which I have alluded -- restraint in the use of power, fairness, civility, and integrity. Let me add one other. After the Civil War a woman walked up to General Lee with a child in her arms and said, "General, what can I do to make my son great?" He replied, "Teach him to deny himself." This applies to us as individuals and to us as a nation. These are principles I commend to you as you go forth to serve and to contribute to your community, your State and our country.

Good luck!