

# PIONEERS

An Address by Honorable Homer Cummings

ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

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Honorable Homer Cummings

ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

AT

LINCOLN MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY

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An Address by Honorable Homer Cummings

ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

I CONGRATULATE the members of the graduating class of this University upon the completion of their work, and I bid them Godspeed on the "Commencement Day" which sends them forth as pioneers into the life ahead. To youth the Golden Age always lies ahead; but every age is the product of its pioneers and of their spirit; and while there are many places in this Nation of ours sacred to the memory of our venturing forefathers, I know of no spot in which it is more appropriate than right here in Cumberland Gap, to ask ourselves what inspiration we can draw from their lives.

I ask you today to imagine a spring morning one hundred and sixty-six years ago, and to vision a little group of four men with Daniel Boone beating their way up through the pathless woods from Powells Valley and entering this Gap. Or move forward a brief four years and see his first small colonizing group following him into the hills beyond. Think of their meagre material equipment! But think also of their superb

spiritual equipment as they halted here and laid their plans to go forward; and think, too, of the fine faith, courage, and self-reliance with which they faced their unknown destinations and their unknown destinies. Beyond them lay a wilderness full of hazard and uncertainty.

True, one or two of them had been beyond the Gap, but only as hunters. It was Boone, then a young farmer, who looked across the ranges and had visions of empire and who had the courage to leave wife and child and ease and to devote his life to make a dream come true. History has never dealt quite justly with Boone as one of its great pathfinders and leaders. Our boyish idealizations of hunters and Indian fighters have hindered us from seeing him in his true perspective as, perhaps, one of the noblest and certainly as one of the most typical, of American pioneers. Hunter and Indian fighter to be sure he was; but he was more. With all his limitations he was also builder and statesman. The "Wilderness Road" which he blazed through this Gap became a national path over which thousands trod to the making of this Nation. It was not the hunter's zeal nor the mere urge for adventure, and even less the search for material gain, that carried Boone forward. He pushed onward not in the spirit of the conqueror or as a seeker for gold. He had something of that divine vision which inspires and sustains all natural leaders of men.

Before Boone left his farm on the Yadkin, stimulated no doubt by what Finley and McBride, the hunters, had told him of rich lands that lay beyond these mountains, he brooded long over the possibilities of pushing the seaboard settlements westward. As he said later, he

felt that he was a divine instrument to settle the wilderness. As his path lengthened, his faith in the building of a great state grew stronger. In all truth he, as much as any one person, may be said to have laid the foundation stones of our great States of the West; and if it were possible to say that one path more than any other led to the opening of that mighty region I should say it was this old Wilderness Road of Boone's which began in this very valley where we now are.

In 1770 Boone was probably the only white man in Kentucky; yet in a few years thousands of settlers followed him. Some, of course, came as traders and hunters, but, for the most part, they were not adventurers nor conquistadors with an El Dorado complex. They went forth as home lovers and home builders. It was an inner vision that led them on—a vision of human freedom and of self-realization. Their individualism was, indeed, rugged, but it was shot through with a stern sense of man-to-man justice. They respected each other's rights, they were imbued with the spirit of mutual aid, they helped build each other's cabins and harvest each other's crops. It is interesting to note how, in a wilderness that knew no law, the first thing that Boone did, after he succeeded in establishing his first little group of log-cabin settlers, was to set up the machinery of law and of government, crude though it may have been. In those days they did not eternally talk of law enforcement; they practised law observance. Law was something very real to them. For example, before there were more than a corporal's guard of pioneers in all Kentucky, seventeen of them met at Boonsboro in 1775 and laid the political foundations of that State. If you think that the passion for political

and parliamentary disputation is a characteristic of our day, I commend you to a reading of the proceedings of that first pioneer convention.

They were not supermen, but brave men and women proceeding upon their great adventure. Self-reliant, self-respecting, independent, alert, resourceful, optimistic—asking charity from no one; ready to face “the diet hard and the blanket on the ground”; willing to hoe their own row; full of the spirit of initiative and enterprise; prepared to face sacrifices and to render them: these were our ancestors. This is the inspiration and the example they hand us who are now asked to “take up the task eternal, the burden and the lesson.” Are we keeping faith?

I think we are. In spite of all the gospels of despair and all the prophets of gloom and disaster, I am confident that the pioneer spirit is not dead.

We still have many frontiers to cross and to explore. What is all education but a pioneer crossing of new frontiers—a crossing by old trails into new and unexplored and still pathless areas to a better and more complete life? This great adventure known as Life goes on to new climaxes, and, if one looks at the matter properly, it is a vastly interesting and constantly unfolding drama in which the most obscure individual may take a vital part.

You may say the world into which you are to go forth on the morrow is vastly changed from that of the early days. And that is so. Or you may say that this era into which you are born is one of such changed conditions that the ancient virtues and the spirit of the pioneers are outmoded or will not function. That is not so. Never before was the need for this old spirit

and these old virtues so urgent nor its rewards so certain. Your own opportunities are all the greater precisely because it is a changed and ever changing world. Tested from every angle these changes are sources of strength and not weakness, if the spirit of man is equal to them. Do not be disheartened or misled by all the talk about revolutionary transitions, chaos, crisis, and collapse. We talk too much about being in the midst of a crisis. Every era is one of crisis and transition just as every era is and ever has been one of change. Continuous change marks not only our celestial system and organic world but it inheres in every form of life from polyyps to politicians. Ideals change. Beliefs change. What was heterodox in one period becomes orthodox in another. Time plays havoc with dogmas and, also, with institutions. We build up to tear down and tear down to build up. Only in a static world could it be otherwise. Science reveals to us that from the infinite heavens to the finite atom everything is constantly moving from somewhere to somewhere else; and in the world of man's own making the same is true. All economic life, as John Stuart Mill pointed out, is largely a matter of taking something from somewhere and putting it somewhere else. Ceaseless activity and ceaseless change is a law of life and of progress. To exist is to change; to change is to mature, says Bergson. When you no longer change you are dead. The same is true of nations.

You go forth indeed into a world of amazing complexities and conflicts, but I bid you face it with the faith and courage of your pioneer fathers. Remember it is a big world and also an old world. Don't get into your heads, after the apparent manner of so many

radicals and reformers, that the world starts *de novo* with your day and your entry into it. Youth often acts as if the dead past could, indeed, bury its dead. It cannot, and the future would be in desperate straits if it could. I regard reverence for the past—for its traditions, its lessons, and its experiences—as your greatest source of strength.

I spoke of changes and confusions. Don't let them frighten you. If the times seem a little out of joint, yours is the glorious opportunity to help set them right. Civilization is not doomed. The sanity of man will see to that. All that is happening is that some of those obvious and curable defects which time has revealed are awaiting your pioneer attentions. The fields of initiative and enterprise are as great as ever or greater—only they are new fields—and this is exactly what you should want.

\* You have inherited the richest Nation on earth in which to make your way to success and the good life. The increasing complexities of modern civilization demand some pioneer to find the path to necessary simplifications. Is it absurd, for example, to hope that some day the spirit of America will find a means of eliminating the causes of war; or that with all that pioneers in science and industry have done to create wealth, others may not find efficient means of dealing with undeserved poverty? Is it too much to hope that this spirit can find some way of restoring agriculture and bringing the urban and the rural into equilibrium, or of protecting the weak from the strong without devitalizing society? Surely there is a call for pioneers to master the terrors of dependent old age, of unemployment, of crime, of injustice. Like the pathfinders



of old, blazing their way through the wilderness, it is now your opportunity to master a man-made world, and to explore the fields of science, of art, of beauty, of life.

And of these I put life first. When I graduated from college we talked much of success. We were the children of a materialistic era and, perhaps, helped to create a spirit of materialism which it is now your duty to remould to better uses. I think, or at all events I hope, that the youth of today regard success more in terms of life as life, and riches as wealth accumulated more within than without. Of course, you cannot neglect the so-called practical aspects of success, but as pioneers you will find new ways of life and attach new values to new vocations. Industrialism has taught us the need of the expert and the specialist and has rewarded them handsomely. Government, and the social order, in an endless variety of aspects, has equal need of them. Its rewards in material wealth may be relatively small, but in real wealth its recompense will be great.

Every social and political problem resolves itself into one of the individual. If Democracy is to succeed, it will be because you and I as individuals have the spirit of democracy in our hearts. If justice is to prevail, it is because you and I truly love justice and do justice. If liberty is to thrive, it is because *we* truly love liberty. If government is to be free, it will be because you and I first govern ourselves.

I believe passionately in individualism, and I believe we shall see it develop into new and more vital forms. The antidote to all the failures of former government, as Emerson years ago pointed out, is in "the growth

and strength of the individual"—in the substance of his character, his ideals, his will. To develop the individual the State exists—and as he is, so is the State.

A few days ago, I ran across a curious passage, in an ancient book, attributed to a Chinese sage talking twenty-five centuries ago. Even then he was drawing a lesson from the misty past. "The Ancients," he says, "ordered well their own states. Wishing to order well their states, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons. Wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts. Wishing to rectify their hearts, they first sought to be sincere in their thoughts. Wishing to be sincere in their thoughts, they first extended to the utmost their knowledge. Such extension of knowledge lay in the investigation of things. Things being investigated, knowledge became complete. Their knowledge being complete, their thoughts were sincere. Their thoughts being sincere, their hearts were rectified. Their hearts being rectified, their persons were cultivated. Their persons being cultivated, their families were regulated. The families being regulated, their states were rightly governed. Their states being rightly governed, the whole kingdom was made tranquil and happy."