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KEEPER OF THE FAITH

An Address

by

HONORABLE FRANK MURPHY

Attorney General of the United States

at the

"Ten-Year Achievement Dinner"

held in honor of

Dr. Alexander Grant Ruthven,

President of the University of Michigan

at the

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For ten years that have tested American democracy as it has seldom been tested before, President Ruthven has guided our University unswervingly along the only course which befits a democratic educational institution. For that service we cannot repay him, but we can, and do, express to him our heartfelt and undying gratitude.

We live in a dynamic world where political events are consistently the "big news of the day". In such a world, public attention focuses naturally on political leaders. The result, I have come to believe, is a tendency to overstress somewhat the role of the leader in government, and to underestimate the immeasurable importance of the leader in education.

I am prompted to express that opinion because I believe so firmly that democracy functions basically through knowledge which is the product of education - informal as well as formal - and that in the degree that this is so, democracy is dependent upon education. Without knowledge, the members of a democracy cannot intelligently choose their political leaders, and without intelligence in the choice of leaders, democracy must inevitably perish.

I do not, of course, belittle the importance of governmental leaders. Theirs is the often critical duty of dealing with current events and current social phenomena. Theirs is the task of meeting the immediate social needs of the people and of trying at the same time to make provision for the future. Theirs is the burden of adjusting the conduct of society to the contours of a changing world.

In comparison, the educator's task is prosaic and unexciting. He is thought of traditionally as a pedagogue, amiably making his way through a quiet world of books and classes.

But day by day, year by year, as the world we live in grows increasingly complex, it becomes more and more apparent that his labor is freighted with the most tremendous significance.

Every day - year in, year out - his is the delicate task of dealing with human minds - with minds that are to lead in deciding the nation's course with respect to future problems. His work is with those who are to have an important part in determining whether society shall adjust itself by democratic methods to the changing times or cling to the identical patterns of conduct that were suitable for a by-gone era. In his hands rests the power to mold the thinking of tomorrow's leaders. He works on the bed-rock, and because that is true, no work is more important than his.

These are philosophical truths that I believe appeal to every thoughtful student of the democratic process. But in the past ten years, world events have vested these truths with a grim and startling reality.

The economic avalanche that ushered in this decade brought with it social forces and conditions that spelled annihilation for some democracies less firmly rooted than ours. In their stead has risen tyranny, clothed in new regalia and labelled with different names. Today the spectre of that tyranny -- spotted by the atmosphere of war -- haunts the democracies that still survive.

Thoughtful friends of democracy know that this spectre will not be downed simply by the practice of democracy as a political form. They know that democracy in this turbulent world must be something more - a fighting faith courageously and wisely applied to the urgent problems of economic insecurity and social injustice. They know, above all, that to survive, democracy must be not merely a way of life for society but a personal way of life for the individual.

I believe that with all its imperfections, American democracy has enough moral strength and faith in itself to cope successfully with anything that may threaten its existence today.

But what of tomorrow? What of the day when America will be faced with new problems that we do not dream of in 1939? Will those who follow be equipped intellectually and spiritually to protect democracy against the ravages of intolerance and insecurity and racial hatred? Will they have the breadth and the length of vision to adjust their ways of living to a new and different world?

It is because the answer to these questions rests, in a very large measure, with the leaders of education that their work is vital and dramatic. Let them be insensitive or faithless to their duty of encouraging democratic thinking today, and the defenses of democracy are already lowered for the attacks that will come tomorrow. But let them meet their responsibility with wisdom and courage, and the future of free institutions is made more secure.

I am aware of no finer example of the educator who is alive to this great duty than the wise teacher, brilliant scholar and far-sighted devotee of freedom whom we are met to honor tonight.

We have lived through a decade in which many men -- seeing democracies go down in ruins -- have come to believe that only a totalitarian government can efficiently and quickly respond to the needs of the people.

Yet President Ruthven has steadfastly insisted that democracy "is the only kind of government for which fully-informed, intellectually honest men can honestly fight." He has seen and stoutly maintained -- as the friends of democracy have seen and maintained all through the ages -- that if it is true, as some people contend, that democracy is merely an illusion, the human family is destined to know only misery and strife.

Throughout this unhappy decade, in America and elsewhere, we have heard this device or that panacea proclaimed as the answer and solution to all the grave problems of organized society.

Yet he has not wavered from the sound conviction that the ills of mankind will give way not to easy nostrums, but only to the complete correction of basic flaws. Last June, speaking to the class of '39, he stated that fact with a beautiful clarity.

"Democracy," he said, "will always be in danger unless it can improve continually by training its citizens to use the franchise intelligently, to eliminate the racketeer and the self-seeking politician, and to co-operate consistently in promoting a government 'under which a wrong to the humblest is an affront to all.'"

This first decade of his ministry has seen depression and economic distress give rise, as they always do, to intolerance and reaction expressed in a thousand different ways. The clamor of excited persons for repression and regimentation of thought has hammered on the ears of educators and government leaders alike.

But without confusion or hesitation, he has stood for the truth that the hope of civilization is in "free, informed minds trained to think rationally and to detect and avoid emotionalism."

In this hectic period of transition, we have heard time and again the familiar warnings of danger in any alteration of the status quo.

But refusing to lose sight of essential facts, he has maintained, with a scholar's impartiality, that far from being wicked or immoral, the espousal of change is an essential of democracy -- that without it, free government will wither away. And like the true philosopher, he has refused to become emotional or lose perspective, pointing out instead that the opposition to change is, after all, an inevitable thing which may be viewed simply as "one of the limiting environmental factors in social progress."

Some individuals, fearful for the safety of democracy, have asked whether we could not better defend it by setting limits to academic freedom. But Doctor Ruthven -- unconfused by hysteria -- has held firm to a democratic philosophy of teaching as well-rounded and clear as his understanding of democracy itself.

To him, it is the teacher's duty to promote "informed, unbiased thinking;" to guard that this thinking is not distorted by prejudice or expressed in anti-social deeds; to look at the world not merely as it is today but as it should be or may be tomorrow; to point out flaws in

present-day society; and to help in finding methods of improvement. Consistently he has maintained that it is not for the college to teach people what to believe or what not to believe, but only to train them how to think and to reason intelligently for themselves.

These, it seems to me, are the thoughts of a man with a living faith in education as a pre-requisite of freedom. This is the philosophy that makes a great university. It is the spirit that has earned for Michigan a substantial and enduring fame.

I recognize the value of buildings such as this -- of libraries and laboratories and all the other parts of Michigan's magnificent physical plant.

But buildings and equipment alone cannot make a school. Johns Hopkins knew that, and instead of investing in brick and stone and mortar, he started his great institution in an abandoned piano factory, using his wealth to employ the right type of minds.

So it has been with Michigan. Men like Tappan and Angell and Hutchins have fostered and nourished a philosophy and method of education in harmony with the needs of a democratic society. Around that spiritual nucleus, brick and stone and mortar have been reared into a University whose physical beauty has meaning because back of it there is nobility of spirit and of purpose.

Michigan has been led to greatness by men who understood the inseparable bond between true education and democratic living. Michigan is great today because at the helm there is still a man who is alive to that relation and whose desire it is that neither democracy nor education shall suffer through any failing of the other.

For keeping the faith so vigilantly and loyally, Doctor Ruthven,
the sons and daughters of Michigan will thank you with grateful hearts
in decades to come, even as we here assembled thank you tonight.