Following is the text of remarks prepared by Eric Sevareid for delivery at Stanford University's 80th Commencement, June 13, 1971.

Those of you about to leave this place have by now heard a thousand lectures and speeches. On the assumption that the last swing of the proctorial lash is the most painful of all, this one will be merciful, that is, brief.

This occasion today is about as memorable for me as it is for you. Not often is a general journalist asked to appear before the principal annual gathering of a famous university. In the age of the expert, the general journalist remains a jack of all trades and master of none, save the trade of being jack of all. A society of generalists only would scarcely move; a society of specialists only would be a chaos. None of my generalizations is to be confused with final truth. The work of persons like myself was best described by Mr. Walter Lippmann as "notes made by puzzled men."

All that we try to do is to live at the growing points of society and detect the cutting edges of history. We often fail.

I have managed to survive by now through the majority portion of this explosive, frightening and enthralling century. I have gone from the midwest, isolationist heart of America in the horse and buggy days, accompanied millions of my countrymen, armed and unarméd to many foreign places, seen the surface transformation and vulgarization of our land, felt old foundations shaking—personal, political, moral and social.

I watched America rescue much of the world from the vastest threat to civilized hopes ever experienced, rebuild much of a physically shattered world, then swell with power itself and at last fall into the historically familiar trap defined by John Adams who said that "power always thinks it has a great soul and vast views beyond the comprehension of the weak."

"I have seen enormous advance in the material condition of American life produce enormous discontent; unprecedented freedom produce unprecedented cries of oppression; skirted many a gap of credibility, generations, races, and haves and have-nots; observed the balance between order and injustice—the ancient problem of free societies—shift to this side, then that; I, too, have felt the telescoping of time, the mists growing over both the past and the future.

Yet in the end I know that I remain incorrigibly American, hopelessly square, no doubt, in retaining a sense of identity with myself, my country, and my generation, persuaded that personality cannot be entirely separated from nationality, that, save in a flimsy sense, there is no such thing as a citizen of the world, and that rejection of the national past would have the same disorienting effect upon this society as the sudden loss of memory upon a person.

I have no overall prescription to offer for America's present ills, so many of which are obvious to everyone of you; no detailed guidelines for the conduct of adult life through this era of profound transition.

I do feel there really is such a thing as common sense. It is born of experience. It takes some living. The general journalist is at best a horseback philosopher. He is likely to hunger for new ideas and shun ideologies because they usually prove to be old and worn out, however new their rhetorical dressing. He becomes aware that it is not only the elderly who perpetuate well worn conceptions but often the young as well, succeeding generations of whom confuse their own newness with that of the conceptions.

He has to offer, for whatever it may be worth, only his odds and ends, his private collection of notions, hard-won by much living among the poor and the rich, the impotent and the powerful, the most brilliant and the most common of men and women. From the clutter of my own observations I would offer these:

(over)
Men want security, they want stimulation, they want identity and the order in which they want them changes with changing conditions. The modern revolt of the so-called masses, nearly everywhere on this earth, is not by any means just a revolt against material want. It is just as much, in this age of publicity, a revolt against anonymity, whether it be an affluent western student protesting big institution impersonality or a Nigerian bush lad fleeing to the outskirts of Lagos or a Peruvian farmer leaving the eastern valleys for the barrios of Lima.

I have known few men who considered themselves the average man. None who thought of himself as a member of the public. The public are only people and the people are only persons, no two exactly alike. I have known none, of whatever status, who thirsted for equality save with those above him.

It has seemed to me that in terms of popular culture there is an in-world and an out-world. Culturally, if not politically, it is the west that has won the world. Even our putative opponents, the Chinese and the Russians, want the materials, the science, the fashions, the architecture, the song and dance of the west. And politically, even they somehow feel obliged to call themselves republics.

In every western country there is a growing gap between ordinary men and intellectuals, and it is not clear how this is to be resolved. The intellectual is the natural creator and dissenter; but to the extent that he fosters, not dissent itself, but violent dissent, I fear for him and his status. It is perfectly clear that any people, given no alternatives, will choose tyranny over anarchy, because anarchy is the worst tyranny of all. In the latter part of his life, one of this century’s great intellects, Alfred North Whitehead, thinking, I believe, of America, gave this warning: “wait for the back streets. When they move the intellectuals are swept aside.”

That can happen here. We are already seeing the state’s instinct for order manifesting itself more and more severely through various actions and edicts by the present federal government. A fresh reminder of an old truth is due: the special nature of liberties is that they can be defended only as long as we still have them. So the very first signs of their erosion must be resisted, whether the issue be domestic political surveillance by the army, so called preventive detention or the freedom of corporate television or that of a campus newspaper.

Dissent is right and proper—indeed, vital to our life—but it does not follow that therefore the more dissent the better. It is an eternal error to believe that a cause considered righteous sanctifies unrighteous methods. Only ends justify means but they do not justify any means. It is eternally true that both successful and unsuccessful revolutions increase the power of the state, not that of the individual.

Many now see the general organization of American life as a structure, an establishment. Their vision seems to be of an edifice, bolted and held together by a few individuals and groups for their own selfish ends. But we are dealing with natural growth more than with construction.

I see it, my contemporaries see it, as a kind of vast coral reef with a billion passages, interstices and safety chambers, each one the product of some desire or need. It can be added to, subtracted from; it can be rechanneled and renovated. But it cannot be torn down without producing an immensity of chaos and death.

Many now see human beings as symbols. It is enough for them, to characterize those of whom they disapprove, as pigs or hippies, or bolsheviks or capitalists or bourgeoisie. By this mental exercise their enemies are automatically dehumanized and can, with a clear conscience, be executed, imprisoned, exiled, or shouted down. Since they are unhuman, they are presumed not to bleed when stabbed. This is perhaps the profoundest corruption of our time.

It is a notion of mine that there is a sacredness about the idealism of youth, as there is about conjugal parental love, but that the ideas or the actions of youth require no automatic reverence. It is not notion, but history that while all youth movements are idealistic that is no guarantee against evil results, as this century’s mass movements have repeatedly shown.
It is a further notion that at the core of the generation gap lies the unchangeable truth that youth measures in one direction—from things as they are to their ideal of what things ought to be; while older people also measure present against the past they remember, their own society against other societies on this earth they have known. They must add these two measurements. Otherwise, experience—life—teaches very little.

So they doubt that lasting cultures, counter or otherwise, are invented thought up; they can only grow, slowly, from the social soil. They know there is a time to be childlike, a time to be young, a time to be mature, a time to be old and a time to die. And that a general confusion of these times and these roles will have no happy or healthy outcome.

The war between the intellectual and the middle class in the western world is now nearly two centuries old. It has been my impression, from much work abroad, that societies with no middle class, or a very weak one, are societies too rough for me, or I would think, for most of you.

Journalists tend to develop an instinctive resistance to popular cliches. As I do not believe that law and order is a code word for racism, save among bigots—but the deepest of social instincts—so I do not share the idea that the American middle class is apathetic. It is not apathy that is stretching our political and social institutions to the breaking point. It is the very opposite—the conflict of intense, highly unapathetic individuals, groups and vested interests, as any mayor, senate, or college president surveying the morning’s mountain of letters and telegrams on his desk will tell you. And this is a product of freedom.

I have become persuaded that the American middle class is probably the most evangelical middle class on earth, or close to it. You could hardly throw a stone in the typical, established suburb, without hitting a house where the parents are not only rearing and educating their children to the limit of their ability, not only enduring heavy taxes, a high proportion of which now goes to the less fortunate, but working after hours to help others, through some neighborhood enterprise, charitable or otherwise. I find this in very few countries.

I have become persuaded that America is one of the least materialistic societies on earth in its spirit—if only because it has the materials. It is in most of the Asian and African societies I have known that, since the materials are desperately wanting, the spirit of materialism bites like iron upon the soul, from birth to death. What has happened here is that the tidal wave of materials, more and more of it pure junk, has produced not only revulsion, but practical difficulties, not only among the idealistic young but also the affluent old; so that for every middle class family trying to add to its possessions, you find another trying to reduce them and somehow simplify their lives.

We are learning that affluence without simplicity is a giant trap; that poverty itself is endurable, but not poverty side by side with affluence, and in this time of instant, intimate communication, we all live side by side; that conservation is the other side of the coin of progress; that change is as necessary to the American identity as De Gaulle thought grandeur was to the French; that changes in our daily living have come too fast for our institutions; but that on the whole America remains the world’s central experimental laboratory in human relations.

Our political leaders are learning, in the wake of our intellectuals, that Sophocles was right: nothing that is vast enters into the affairs of mortals without a curse and that the vast American power has now produced its curse.

They are learning that America’s reach in the world has exceeded its grasp; that we can really give little to other societies that they can take; we can only help them find for themselves, at best; they are learning to revise a basic foreign policy premise, to wit—that peace, democracy and material progress are not only good, each in itself, but somehow interdependent. They are learning to doubt, again in the wake of our intellectuals, that peace is indivisible or that freedom is indivisible and to acknowledge that each is highly divisible and will coexist with war and tyranny as they have through most human history. In other words that the Hitler Stalin period in which our foreign policy was born, was the exception, not the rule.
They, and many of us, are learning that money, missions and agencies do not of themselves solve bedrock problems at home, in the great city slums, for example; and that what we now confront goes deeper than bad environment, bad housing, bad food, bad health, but is a problem of psychology, a true, subculture of the human spirit.

Those with courage enough find themselves forced to reexamine the pervasive notion that government can lead the way to personal happiness, so they are obliged to discount the current religionizing of politics, as they question the politicizing of religion.

They find themselves welcoming the growing intellectual challenge to the persistent concept that society corrupted man, instead of the other way around; they see the idea more and more in the light of a vast alibi and cop-out for the faint in spirit, and perceive the precipice and the void at the far end of this conception. Anew, they are persuaded of an ancient truth that man is both virtuous and evil, loving and hating, peaceful and hostile, social and selfish. They are persuaded that political systems built on the premise of man’s essential virtue like those built on the premise of his essential evil, must end in tyranny.

And so they come around again, to a fresh respect for the original American constitutional concepts of power checked, power balanced, due process of law, respect for the law and the rule of reason.

The course of my own crowded, at times abrasive life, has led me back there, too. In the year that I was born in Dakota, Professor Gilbert Murray at Columbia was writing of Greece and what happened to it when it lost its nerve, that is, its belief in reason; when it bathed itself in neurotic guilt feelings and turned back to mysticism and the politics of emotion and revelation. Which is happening here.

This was his final counsel: “As far as knowledge and conscious reason will go, we should follow resolutely their austere guidance.” When they reach their limits, he said, as they do, then “we must use as best we can those fainter powers of apprehension and surmise and sensitiveness by which, after all, most high truth has been reached as well as most high art and poetry. Careful always to seek for truth and not for our own emotional satisfaction, careful not to neglect the real needs of men and women through basing our life on dreams, and remembering above all to walk gently in a world where the lights are dim and the very stars wander.”

Journalists who have lived as I have lived are generally poor at moral exhortation; we may be meddlesome, proctoring thorns in the flesh of men with public power; we are a bit reluctant about direct advice to private persons.

But since you have honored me with this pulpit and your attention I will venture four prescriptive observations:

It is necessary that we all do good directly whenever we can. It is more important, in the end, for society as well as ourselves, that we do well in our own work, whether that be laying a sewer or teaching philosophy.

What counts the most in the long haul of adult life is not brilliance or eloquence or charisma or daring-do. But the quality the Romans called “gravitas.” Patience, stamina, weight of judgment.

Churchill was right. The prime virtue is courage because it makes all the other virtues possible.

And what Americans must find again is their sense of trust. We have to trust others, even those we fear and think may wish us harm. We have, each of us, to take this risk. That is what built this country—risk and trust.

A country of which I, for one, am grateful beyond my expression, to be a part.

Thank you. Good luck.