



Whittier College

Commencement Address
by
Robert A. Skotheim
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"Whittier and America: A Century Ago and Today"

by

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Robert A. Skotheim is a distinguished leader in the Los Angeles cultural and intellectual communities. Presently, he is president of the Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens. Prior to joining the Huntington, Dr. Skotheim was president of Whitman College from 1975 to 1988 and provost and dean of the faculty at Hobart and William Smith Colleges from 1972 to 1975. He earned his B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. in history at the University of Washington and taught in the history departments at the University of Washington, Wayne State University and the University of Colorado. Dr. Skotheim has written several books, including *American Intellectual Histories and Historians* and *Totalitarianism and American Social Thought*. His works as editor or co-editor include *The Historian and the Climate of Opinion* and *American Social Thought: Sources and Interpretations*, and his articles have appeared in *The Journal of American History*, *Journal of Thought*, *Pacific Historical Review* and *The Journal of the History of Ideas*, among others.

"Whittier and America: A Century Ago and Today"

It is a great pleasure for my wife and me to be here today to honor the graduating Class of 2000. The commencement speech is the necessary sprig of parsley on the graduation plate. It can be viewed and ignored, sampled or rejected. Consuming it entirely will not hurt you.

My connection with Whittier College actually goes back a quarter century to 1975. That was when I became president of Whitman College, in Walla Walla, Wash., at which time I received my first mail misaddressed to the president of Whittier College. During the next 13 years I seemed to receive such mail frequently, although not as often as I received mail misaddressed to the president of Whitworth College, in Spokane, Wash. You are probably thinking that my connection with Whittier was not very meaningful during these years. Well, perhaps not. But after 1988, as I became close to Ruth and Ed Shannon, I became more knowledgeable about the college and appreciative of its ability to retain their dedication. I saw the ability too, in librarian Phil O'Brien, and alum Stan Sanders, whom I saw in action on the California Rhodes Scholarship Selection Committee. Then, earlier this year, I witnessed the hope expressed for the college in the selection and inauguration of President Will. In fact, you graduates seem to be departing the campus just as an institutional renaissance is occurring.

Almost exactly 100 years ago, in June of 1900, the Yearly Meeting of Friends appointed a board of trustees, who selected as first president Charles Tebbetts, a former college professor and then a Pasadena pastor. The difficult job of recruiting faculty and students followed. In 1904, the first commencement graduated four seniors. There were 24 in the whole student body. Whittier's historian, Charles Cooper, calls

President Tebbetts “the founder” of the college. Every president since Tebbetts has dealt with the supreme institutional issue of change and continuity, and it is no different today for President Will.

How different a world it is for her than it was for President Tebbetts, the trustees, faculty, staff and students a century ago. In June of 1900 the average life expectancy was 47. Only 14 percent of American homes had a bathtub; only 8 percent had a telephone. There were only 8,000 automobiles, and 144 miles of paved roads. Alabama, Mississippi, Iowa and Tennessee were each more heavily populated than California, which had 1.4 million residents and was the 21st most populated state. The average wage was 22 cents an hour in the United States. The average worker made between \$200 and \$400 per year. A dentist might make \$2,500, a mechanical engineer \$5,000. Eggs were 14 cents a dozen, and coffee 15 cents a pound. In 1900, 90 percent of all physicians had no college education. Only 6 percent of all Americans graduated from high school. More than 95 percent of all births occurred at home. The three leading causes of death were, first, pneumonia and the flu, second, tuberculosis, and third, diarrhea. Marijuana, heroin, and morphine were all available over the counter at corner drugstores. According to one pharmacist, “Heroin clears the complexion, gives buoyancy to the mind, regulates the stomach and the bowels, and is, in fact, a perfect guardian of health.” In the entire United States, there were only about 230 reported murders annually. It was a different time.

Because of the dramatic alteration in the American landscape, represented by the examples I have given, we are surrounded by people telling us we live in a new world, for a new century. No group in the population is more likely to believe this than today’s graduating seniors. What more tempting thought, and one generally pleasing to young people, than that you are graduating into a new world? How it squares with your sense that your parents’ world, your grandparents’

world, is not your world!

But let us look back again at the year 1900. This time, however, let us look at a different body of evidence. Let us review the 10 social and intellectual features of the nation a century ago most emphasized by historians today.

1. The creation of unprecedented new wealth, much of it from new sources, rooted in new technology, accompanied by an increasing divide between the relatively rich and the relatively poor.
2. Accompanying the fact of this new wealth was the expression of a rationale as a defense and an explanation for its existence. It was the ideology of capitalism, which alleged a “rags-to-riches” secular religion for those who would live by its work ethic. For those who desired a more philosophic underpinning for this “Horatio Alger” myth, Social Darwinism explained the “survival of the fittest” as a contribution to the improvement of mankind.
3. For humanitarian idealists, there was a new philanthropic perspective expressed by the new capitalists. Andrew Carnegie most famously articulated the view that the new wealthy had a non-charitable obligation to give away their money before death. Educational opportunities in the form of schools, colleges, universities and libraries were created by this new philanthropy.
4. New communications technologies at the turn of the century promised to bring a formerly fragmented world into global communication. People were able to be moved physically by the railroad revolution of the 19th century, and now the telegraph and telephone allowed people to communicate even when they did not move physically.

5. Accompanying the fact of this communications technology was a euphoria of optimistic prediction that the new opportunity for human communication would lead to improved human relations. It was said that people would understand one another once they were in communication with one another.

6. There were, of course, pessimistic interpretations of developments, as well as optimistic ones. The deep chasm between the rich and poor caused some observers to make predictions of class war, even revolution, and perhaps socialism.

7. Unprecedented immigration to the United States from new ethnic sources caused anxiety on the part of older Americans, including older immigrant groups. They predicted cultural fragmentation of the alleged historic homogeneity of the American population.

8. Increasing consolidation of American life into bigger and bigger units of organization was said to threaten localism and individuality. Business, government, and all other social organizations agglomerated in a way that created greater bureaucracy in every area.

9. Democratic values, however interpreted, suffused each of the characteristics I have delineated at the turn of the past century, and influenced how they were interpreted. Democratic values comprised the most important part of the belief system of Americans. (This is not to say that the democratic values were internally consistent, or interpreted in the same way by all Americans.)

10. Finally, the triumphs of 19th century science brought the apotheosis of science, objectivity, measurement and quantification to education. From science came not only technology, but specialized graduate and vocational training, professional aspirations in all fields, including management.

- What do we think when we review these 10 most striking characteristics of the turn of the 19th to the 20th century?
- What do we think when we say that the most salient characteristics of a time 100 years ago were: unprecedented new wealth, and deep poverty; a celebration of capitalism and the work ethic; a new philanthropy; a communications revolution, and optimism about what this means; forebodings about class conflict; unprecedented immigration from new lands; bureaucratization of life; pervasive democratic values and unlimited faith in science?
- What we think is that, 100 years later, the very same characteristics are the most striking. Or, to put it more precisely, among the most striking characteristics of year 2000, would be the same ones as in 1900.
- Yet there is a consensus that the 20th century has been one of unprecedented rapidity of change. What does this mean? It means that a century is not a long time in the larger historical sweep of time. Generally speaking, the trend lines of 1900 remain the trend lines of 2000.
- Having said that the trend lines seem to have held constant, let us review briefly what happened to the salient characteristics between 1900 and 2000.

The United States became an increasingly wealthy country, dealing with the deepening chasm between rich and poor by political reform in order to reduce the chance of revolution or even socialism. The ideology of the welfare state competed with the ideology of capitalism. Philanthropic voluntarism complemented the ideology of capitalism. The communications revolution did nothing to increase human understanding; indeed, the worst wars of human experience occurred during the 20th century. None of the most pessimistic predictions materialized, by contrast, with regard to immigration. The immigrant

desire to "Americanize" was all-powerful. Bureaucratization continued apace. Democracy and science, as a constellation of values, however interpreted, seemed each to contain an inexorable logic that continued to unfold. The only checks on the magnetic force of each was the complexity of internal contradictions and different interpretations of what was "democratic" and "scientific."

So you are listening to one of the few commencement talks this spring that emphasizes continuity rather than change. You graduates are not going into the world of 1900, but neither are you going into a completely new world. The most significant change, the one which will matter most to you personally, is not technological, but is the role of women in relation to men. I predict that the most significant exploration of your personal lives will not lie in space technology, but in the space between your ears. I hope Whittier College has prepared you for that space exploration. I hope it has done so by giving you an education in the humanities, social sciences and sciences. I hope you feel your own personal relation to that learning. I hope you have learned the meaning of being part of an educated community, and that you value that participation.

Thank you.

