Remarks by Alexander Heard, Chancellor Emeritus and Professor of Political Science, Vanderbilt University, at the Sixty-Eighth Annual Commencement of Southern Methodist University, Moody Coliseum, Dallas, Texas, May 21, 1983:

LEARNING BY DEGREES

Mr. President, Mr. Chairman, graduates of the classes of 1983, all ladies and gentlemen of Southern Methodist University:

I am grateful for President Shields' invitation to speak with you who today receive your important certificates of learning from this important American university. I congratulate all who are being graduated and your families and faculties who have helped bring you to this day, and join you in awareness that this occasion is, quite literally, a commencement, even more important today as a beginning than as an ending.

* * * * * *

My subject is "Learning by Degrees." The degrees you receive today testify to learning achieved, but the learning must go on so that humans become the beneficiaries and not the victims of their learning. Whether we on this earth will flourish, or suffer, or perish from the cumulative consequences of human learning is the titanic issue of our world and of your future.

Educated creativity has produced marvels of reward for today's favored humans on the earth's surface--in better health, in longer lives, in more recreation, in greater opportunities for artistic expression, in greater opportunities for development of personal talents, in greater opportunities for individual satisfactions, in miraculously high standards of living. We here today are inheritors of the cumulative beneficial

consequences of centuries of intellectual exploration and training along all dimensions of human experience. How could anyone reasonably ask for more than this privileged personal opportunity in the most prosperous period of human history?

The question is a poignant and disconcerting one, because we are bewitched by the irony of our millennium. That irony, especially in these present years that have been called the American Century, is the cosmic ambiguity in the results of education. This is surely not a comfortable occasion to pose education's most uncomfortable question, but the question is a compelling one: Will the world be able to survive the consequences of education?

Our world has never had more education, but in critically important ways humans around the globe have never lived in greater danger than we do now.

It is unsettling to have to say to you who are having a significant segment of your education authenticated today that educated people have fought our most destructive wars, committed our most heinous crimes, displayed our most callous emotions, disrupted our most valued institutions, violated our most precious values, and mined the earth's resources at rates and in ways that put in doubt the future of its inhabitants. Primitive and uneducated humans throughout the life of the planet have surely been wasteful, malign, cruel, and killing, too, but our capacity for destruction and our acts of destruction have been rising steadily over the decades and over the centuries by degrees--it would seem, absurdly, rising as the number of degrees awarded by the educational institutions of the world have been rising.

"Progress" as we have traditionally thought of it in Western Civilization is often disastrously destructive of cherished values and institutions. And that progress is an ultimate product of the kinds of intellectual activities over the years, decades, and centuries in which your university and mine are assiduously engaged.

That mournful observation on this day of happy celebration does not mean that you have been wasting your time, and some of us have been wasting our lives, in an enterprise that in its ultimate meaning is ruinous. But it does mean that university-educated people must recognize their heavy, inherent obligation to use their learning to shape the values and products of our culture in ways that enhance and do not destroy it. That is the unavoidable imperative of educated persons—to apply the world's learning to the values and products of our culture in ways that enhance and do not destroy it. That calls for the unending enlargement of our capacity to live peacefully and fruitfully together.

* * * * * *

Education is a process of earning degrees, and surely one of continuing to learn by degrees, but the enlightenment and self-understanding essential for a peaceful and fruitful future will require more than a normal, steady enlargement of knowledge and deepening of insights--more than thinking as usual.

We are at a junction point in the human journey at which five planetary conditions converge to create a world context new in human experience. There is something new under the sun.

Those five conditions are these:

First, appetites for Western democratic political liberties have been whetted in more places and more insistently than ever before in human experience. That is so whether the cultural, social, economic, historic conditions that gave birth to those liberal political values elsewhere, and made possible their realization elsewhere, are present or not. The result is widespread political frustration.

Second, the capacity of the world's national economies, taken all together, to satisfy human needs and to stimulate lust for luxury is magically greater than ever before. But the results are unevenly earned and distributed, producing widespread economic frustration.

Third, national and international economic and political systems are more intricately and inextricably interdependent than ever before, often limiting independence of action and leading to national frustration.

Fourth, the potential for maiming the planet, with its unique threat to human continuity, that first exploded in 1945 has become ever more portentous with each passing year.

And fifth, our successes in discovering the secrets of matter and energy and exploiting them for human use--meeting needs and satisfying indulgencies--have created an overpopulated and wasting planet whose carrying capacity for the predicably more numerous world peoples is, literally, threatened.

We are beginning to see fragmentary awareness of the need for a qualitatively new intellectual address of the human predicament.

A recent editorial in Science by Frank Press, President of the National Academy of Sciences, argued that scientific endeavor should transcend the momentary frictions of national competition. "It is," he

said, "--or should be--a global binding agent, uniting all cultures in the common quest to understand nature and to improve the human condition."

An essay in Discover this month applauds the ambition of NASA--The National Aeronautics and Space Administration--to draw on that agency's extraordinary resources to address future "Global Habitability" by a "close-up detailed study of the anatomy, physiology, and pathology of the earth itself." We have the capacity "now to begin monitoring the planet, spotting early on the evidences of trouble ahead for our species or others, especially the kinds of trouble for which we humans are responsible."

We must move to a new level--sometimes it may be reversion to a former level--of imagination and insight. Norman Cousins deplores this month in the Saturday Review the inability to get young women and men who are superbly trained in our universities to discuss the human potentiality. He is not the first to note that the well trained can be poorly educated. "They know everything that is to be known about the functional requirements of their trade but very little about the human situation that serves as the context for their work."

To learn the context in which we work and live--including understanding those five converging planetary conditions I have described--must be a primary goal of education. We cannot be encouraged that we are educating well.

* * * * * *

Last month the National Commission on Excellence in Education presented a report to the President of the United States that said: "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the

mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war."

Last month the Report of the Inter-American Dialogue was made. The Dialogue was sponsored by the Woodrow Wilson International Center in Washington and forty-six citizens of the Western Hemisphere joined in its conclusions and recommendations. As I read the Report and its reasoning, it says essentially that our Hemisphere today faces economic, social, and political difficulties more serious than ever before in the New World's history.

United States interests, including the interests of Texans and all others here today, reach all around the globe. Soedjatmoko, the Rector of the United Nations University in Tokyo and former Indonesian Ambassador to the United States, not long ago said a simple truth: "The whole globe has become a very small island."

Our very small island is an island of multiplying population densities, of revolutionary technologies of communication and transport, of complex interactions of conflicting cultures, of growing destructiveness of the means of violence, and of increases in the numbers to whom the means of violence are available. Since the end of World War II in 1945, there have been around the globe 150 other wars, small and large. Presently there are at least 32 nations, mostly in the Third World, that spend more on defense than on education and health care combined.

Our small island is very much an island of physical wasting by consumption and erosion. Soedjatmoko argues pragmatically that, "Living on our small island, with its growing billions, . . . unless we learn to love our fellow human being—whatever his culture, colour, ideology, relative strength or social status—we may all very well perish."

At a symposium at Syracuse University two years ago, André van Dam of Argentina, speaking from "A Third World Viewpoint," made the overarching point that the developed nations, and particularly the United States, cannot expect the future to be fashioned as was the past--that is, only in the light of their own needs and opportunities. The existing distribution of the world's energy sources, raw materials, capital surpluses, labor supplies, potential markets and national aspirations make that expectation a thing truly of the past.

The recent president of the World Bank, Robert McNamara, declared in assessing two decades of development: "Between the two populations of the planet, that of the developed part and that of the undeveloped part, there is a seismic rift so deep that it can produce terrible splits causing everything to explode."

In the last Century, Americans had a long and painful tutelage in internecine conflict provided by a Civil War between the northern and southern sections of our country. But there are a new North and a new South in our new world context of the emerging Twenty-First Century.

The judgments I have been citing stem from the disparity in material circumstances and sense of satisfaction between the world's developed and less well developed nations, between what in a new shorthand have come to be called the "North" and the "South." Kurt Waldheim, former Secretary General of the United Nations, warned at one of his last sessions of the U.N.'s Economic and Social Council: "Mind the Third World's despair, world chaos can come out of it." Realistic and wise people know there is no way that we of the North can ignore them of the

South except to our infinite peril. Think of all that oil, all those minerals, all those markets, and all those people that they have.

These global dislocations are hard to keep in our daily awareness and they are accompanied by other realities that make thinking as usual by Americans a dangerous risk. The United States no longer has the highest standard of living in the world. Some months ago there was a report that we then ranked ninth.

Between 1973 and 1980, American industrial productivity--measured by real value added per person employed--was lower than, for example, in the United Kingdom, Denmark, the Federal Republic of Germany, Sweden, Belgium, Italy, France, and Japan.

In the years 1960 to 1979, the average annual growth in gross national product per capita for the United States was lower than in 13 of the 17 other nations classified as industrialized by the World Bank.

The fall in American productivity and economic growth has now continued long enough to be recognized as a new continuing condition, not a temporary aberration. We are also much aware of our unemployment, disastrously unbalanced federal budget, impaired ladders of upward mobility for important sectors of the population, and other inequities in American society.

I offer these lugubrious observations on this day of recognition and achievement to remind you of the demanding responsibility that graduates of universities--universities like Southern Methodist University, universities that, taken together, are the central thinking organs of our society--the responsibility that we have to exhibit understanding of those five converging, frustrating planetary conditions that define the

new and urgent context of our lives: the worldwide appetite for hard-to-achieve democratic liberties; the universal lust for hard-to-acquire material luxuries; the unprecedented interdependencies of nations and populations with accompanying limits on national independence; the dangers of nuclear devastation; and the mining of the planet's non-renewable resources.

An enormous dimension of the difficulty is that we live in an unequal world.

There is a prediction that average per capita income in sub-Sahara Africa--an area of 150 million people, already abjectly poor--will decline over the next ten years, while average per capita income goes up in other, richer, parts of the world. The average American consumes 25 times more commercial energy than the average inhabitant of India, yet the latter consumes 40 times more than his neighbor in Nepal. Meanwhile, human aspirations soar on the wings of instant communications that report the conspicuous consumption of industrial nations and the promise of more from micro-electronics and biotechnology and all the wonders of post-industrial productivity. And with those potentially liberating innovations comes despairingly the spectre of a dislocated, post-democratic world in which issues of survival take precedence over the values we cherish and have striven for over the centuries, values of social justice, civil liberty, and national independence.

These fragmentary realities of our divided humanity put a hard burden on educated people coming out of our colleges and universities in 1983, for the obligation is inherently yours to bring the resources of the human intellect to bear effectively on the difficulties, hopes, and opportunities of humankind.

We hear much these days about American difficulties in competiting economically with Japan. We read of the construction of Tsukuba Science City dedicated to development of high technology, education for it, and increased productivity from it. That there are such difficulties is a fact suffused with irony, as we think back four decades, but it is a fact that also must stir admiration. There is a lesson for us in Japan's achievements.

I read a quotation from Toshiwa Doko, an important figure in Japan's development since World War II, on Japan's remarkable achievements—in transistors, integrated circuits, electronics. Doko said: "We have no natural resource, no military power. We have only one resource: the inventive capacity of our brains. It has no limits. We must make use of it. We must educate, train, equip. In the very near future, this mental power will become the most creative common good for all humanity."

"This mental power will become the most creative common good for all humanity." The progressive extension of your creative mental power is the greatest possible gift that could be earned by you, and bestowed on you, at Southern Methodist University. Its exercise is the greatest obligation you owe in return. If we of the United States are properly selfish in defining the radically new context of our lives and discerning the inevitable interlock our self-interest has with the welfare of our neighbors, educated people will lead the way toward the joy and abundance and peaceful resolve of conflict on which the welfare of humans everywhere depends.

Good luck.