



Each year the Atlantic takes its pick of the more notable commencement addresses, and this year we are proud to print the words spoken by GEORGE F. KENNAN to the seniors of Radcliffe College. A former ambassador, who spent many years in Russia, a former policy-maker of our State Department, Mr. Kennan knows full well the necessity of national security. He also knows the risks we run if we attempt to establish internal policing which parallels that of the police state.

THE ILLUSION OF SECURITY

by GEORGE F. KENNAN

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Our time, this morning, is brief: the occasion pleasant. I have racked my brain to think of something to say to the members of this graduating class, at such a moment, that would not involve those bitter questions of foreign and domestic policy that have been debated at such length and at the cost of so much unpleasantness in these recent months. One alternative, of course, would be to speak of personal life. But some two decades of parenthood have finally taught me something of the reality of the gap in the generations, and of my limitations as a dispenser of wisdom and advice to younger people in personal matters. That thrusts us back on the field of public affairs, where the choice is not great.

A distinguished American recently observed, on a similar occasion, that "one of the most curious and persistent myths of democratic society is that political figures have anything important or interesting to say, especially when they are out of office."

The same, goodness knows, could be said with equal aptness of retired government officials. We are, I fear, a gloomy race. Our faith in our country is there, and undiminished, but it lies deeply imbedded within us, in troubled depths. We do not fail to greet with immense inner satisfaction those things that do seem to us to be constructive and hopeful; but by and large we follow the course of public events with a sort of anxious and paternal apprehension, like a sailor who watches a strange crew sailing his craft; and if you prod us into a reaction — as anyone does who asks us to speak at Commencement ceremonies — what you get are our anxieties, for they are so much more explicit and so much closer to our tongues than our hopes.

So this morning, at the risk of speaking of matters that have perhaps been too much spoken of already, I am going to tell of one or two things that cause me anxiety and then of a common con-

clusion I derive from them that might usefully be borne in mind by people just entering the status of adult citizenship.

The first of these anxieties relates to foreign affairs. As many of you may know, I have never taken an alarmist view, and do not take one now, of the nature of our conflict with Soviet power. I have never felt, and do not feel today, that another great war could possibly serve as a useful instrument for promoting the interests of either side in this unhappy conflict. In a number of reflections about the nature of our world; in the fact that war has become so obviously self-defeating and suicidal; in the growing clarity with which the last two World Wars begin now to stand out on the landscape of history as tragic, colossal follies from which no one could be said to have gained; in the tendency of time to change all things and to erode all militant faiths — in these things I have found reason for hope and good cheer, and have spent much of my time and energy in these recent years trying to persuade others to approach what we call the East-West conflict in a similar spirit.

Yet I am bound to say that in recent weeks and months I have witnessed with increasing dismay what has seemed to me to be the progressive neglect or rejection, or disappearance for one reason or another, of the more hopeful possibilities for making progress in this problem by peaceful means. Above all, I have watched with a sinking of the heart the way in which many people in our country have, as it seems to me, been pressed relentlessly into states of mind where they can see no solution to these difficulties at all, and even no end to them, except in the horrors of atomic war. This has happened in some instances because people have been impatient of partial solutions and unable to contemplate continued uncertainty. In other cases, I suspect people have been carried by the deceiving compul-

sions of the weapons race into conclusions that neglect all the ulterior considerations, and particularly the imponderables. In still other cases, people may have been the victims of their own brave and rash slogans. But in any event, those longer and more subtle and less obvious paths by which we might reasonably hope to make progress in this situation are ones that a great many people in our country, for one reason or another, either reject or fail to understand; and with this rejection or failure of understanding, I fear I see a deterioration in the prospects for our continuing to muddle through these difficulties in the direction of a more hopeful future.

I do not mean to blame ourselves in any exclusive way for the present trend — we do live in a world where there have been released great forces of hatred and violence and vindictiveness, and we have been confronted with a great deal more in the way of provocation than we have given, over the course of these past two decades. And I do not mean to blame any party or administration among us. But I must emphasize that today it is precisely these subjective factors — factors relating to the state of mind of many of our own people — rather than the external circumstances, that seem to constitute the most alarming component of our situation. It is such things as the lack of flexibility in outlook, the stubborn complacency about ourselves and our society, the frequent compulsion to extremism, the persistent demand for absolute solutions, the unwillingness to accept the normal long-term hazards and inconveniences of great power — it is these things in the American character that give added gravity to a situation which would in any case be grave enough, and cause me for the first time to question seriously whether we are really going to be able, with our present outlooks and approaches, to avoid the complication of our international situation to a most dangerous degree.

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THE second of the anxieties I wish to mention relates to our internal situation. It is equally well-worn and equally unstartling; but it must be mentioned nevertheless.

There has been much in our domestic life of these recent months that I am sure we should all like to forget; and I hope that we shall soon be permitted to forget a great deal of it. But there are certain overriding facts that ought not to pass too quickly out of our memories. We ought not to forget that we have witnessed in these recent months the spectacle of many millions of Americans unable to put in its place and to assess with any degree of balance and equanimity the time-honored and unexceptional phenomenon of foreign political activity, intrigue, and espionage in our midst — a phenomenon which no great power has ever been spared

throughout the course of human history, and from which surely no other great power is immune today. Millions of our people have been unable to accept this normal burden of international leadership at its true worth — have been uncertain as to the value to be assigned to it, uncertain as to what weight to give it in comparison with other problems of our national life. And this uncertainty has given them a peculiar vulnerability — a vulnerability to being taken advantage of, to having their fears exploited, and to being stampeded into panicky, ridiculous, and dangerous attitudes, unworthy of their own national tradition, unworthy of themselves.

Under the sign of this weakness we have seen things that cannot fail to bring deepest concern to any thinking American. We have seen our public life debauched; the faith of our people in great and distinguished fellow citizens systematically undermined; useful and deserving men hounded thanklessly out of honorable careers of public service; the most subtle sort of damage done to our intellectual life: our scholars encouraged to be cautious and unimaginative in order to escape being "controversial," a pall of anxiety and discouragement thrown over our entire scientific community, our libraries and forums of knowledge placed on the defensive before the inroads of self-appointed snoopers and censors, a portion of our youth encouraged to fear ideas on the pretext of being defended from them.

We have seen the reputations of our great private philanthropic foundations, with their immense and unique records of contribution to the national life, recklessly attacked; ingratitude flung in the face of the entire institution of private benevolence. We have seen our people taught to distrust one another, to spy, to bear tales, to behave in a manner which is in sharpest conflict with the American tradition. We have seen our friends in other countries frustrated in their efforts to help and support us, reduced to an embarrassed and troubled silence before the calumnies of our enemies upon us, for they were no longer sure whether these calumnies did not contain some measure of truth. And all of this in the name of our protection from Communist subversion, and yet every bit of it agreeable to Communist purposes as almost nothing else could be; and all of it supported by people who then have the effrontery to come before us and to say, "Show us one innocent man who has suffered."

Now it would not be hard to name such a man; but it would be possible to name something far more important: it would be possible to name a great people, no more innocent or less innocent than any of the other great peoples of this world, but nevertheless a people of an immense fundamental decency and good will and practical energy, a people in an unparalleled position to exercise a useful and hopeful influence in this tortured and threatened world community, a people to whom an

historic opportunity had been given, to whom the hopes of the world had turned; it would be possible to name such a people and to show it now, at the moment of its greatest historic responsibility, disaffected and disoriented in some of the deepest sources of its national morale, injured in its capacity to react to the challenges history has laid upon it, reduced from its natural condition of confidence and buoyancy to a state of cynicism and fearfulness and disgust with the processes of its own public life — and all of this in the name of its protection from external subversion.

I do not mean to overrate these things. I have no doubt that in its superficial aspects all of this will pass — is probably already passing. The names, the idols, the scapegoats, the stereotypes, the abused words, and the perverted symbols — I have no doubt that these will all soon disappear, to join the records of the Know-Nothing movement and the chauvinistic hysteria of 1919 in the unhappier annals of our public life.

But I think we cannot comfort ourselves too much with this reflection. These things *have* happened. We *have* reacted this way, on this occasion. There must have been a reason for our doing so. Have we found that reason and learned from it? Are we going to be better armed to understand the next danger — to resist the next attempt by the unscrupulous to mobilize us against ourselves under the banner of our fears?

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THE causes of these phenomena have undoubtedly been many, and deep, and complex. One cannot attempt to recount them or to analyze them in the few brief moments we have at our disposal this morning. But among these possible causes there is one I should like particularly to mention as perhaps worth your attention at this time.

In the case of each of these disturbing situations I have spoken of, I wonder whether an appreciable portion of our difficulty has not been a certain philosophic error to which we twentieth-century Americans, for one reason or another, are prone. I am referring here to that peculiar form of American extremism which holds it possible that there should be such a thing as total security, and attaches overriding importance to the quest for it. A great deal of the impatience that underlies the growing despair in some quarters over the prospects for coping with world Communism by means short of large-scale violence seems to me to flow precisely from the illusion, no doubt bred by our nineteenth-century experience, that there could and should be such a thing as total military security for the United States, and that anything short of this is in the long run intolerable. And similarly, these frenzies many of us seem to have developed with respect to the problem of internal subversion — do they not reflect

a belief that it should be possible for a great power to free itself completely from the entire problem of penetration and intrigue in its life by outside forces and, again, that it is intolerable that this should not be done; so intolerable, in fact, that if it *is not* done, this must be attributed to some stubborn delinquency, if not treason, in the bowels of our public establishment?

If the evil of all this were limited to the fact that it does involve a certain philosophic error, that it causes people to bark up the wrong trees and occasions an inordinate and futile sort of effort, I would not bother to speak of it this morning. But the fact is that it bears dangers worse than any of these. Shakespeare described these dangers, in his inimitable way, in the following words: —

Take but degree away, untune that string,
And, hark! what discord follows; . . .
Then everything includes itself in power,
Power into will, will into appetite,
And appetite, a universal wolf, . . .
Must make perforce a universal prey,
And last eat up himself.

There is something about this quest for absolute security that is self-defeating. It is an exercise which, like every form of perfectionism, undermines and destroys its own basic purpose. The French have their wonderful proverb: *Le mieux est l'ennemi du bien* — the absolute best is the enemy of the good. Nothing truer has ever been said. A foreign policy aimed at the achievement of total security is the one thing I can think of that is entirely capable of bringing this country to a point where it will have no security at all. And a ruthless, reckless insistence on attempting to stamp out everything that could conceivably constitute a reflection of improper foreign influence in our national life, regardless of the actual damage it is doing or the cost of eliminating it, in terms of other American values, is the one thing I can think of that could reduce us all to a point where the very independence we are seeking to defend would be meaningless, for we would be doing things to ourselves as vicious and tyrannical as any that might be brought to us from outside.

This sort of extremism seems to me to hold particular danger for a democracy, because it creates a curious area between what is *held* to be possible and what *is* really possible — an area within which government can always be plausibly shown to have been most dangerously delinquent in the performance of its tasks. And this area, where government is always deficient, provides the ideal field of opportunity for every sort of demagoguery and mischief-making. It constitutes a terrible breach in the dike of our national morale, through which forces of doubt and suspicion never cease to find entry. The heart of our problem, here, lies in our assessment of the relative importance of the various

dangers among which we move; and until many of our people can be brought to understand that what we have to do is not to secure a total absence of danger but to balance peril against peril and to find the tolerable degree of each, we shall not wholly emerge from these confusions.

Now I renounced, at the outset of these remarks, any intention of peddling personal advice. But perhaps I may be permitted, in conclusion, to observe that these reflections are not without their relevance to the problems of the human individual.

In this personal existence of ours, bounded as it is at both ends by suffering and uncertainty, and constantly attended by the possibility of illness and accident and tragedy, total security is likewise a myth. Here, too, an anxious perfectionism can operate to destroy those real underpinnings of existence, founded in faith, modesty, humor, and a sense of relativity, on which alone a tolerable human existence can be built. The first criterion of a healthy spirit is the ability to walk cheerfully and sensibly amid the congenital uncertainties of exist-

ence, to recognize as natural the inevitable precariousness of the human condition, to accept this without being disoriented by it, and to live effectively and usefully in its shadow.

In welcoming you, then — as it is my privilege this morning to do — into the fellowship and responsibility of maturity, let me express the hope that in each of your lives, as individuals and as citizens, *le bien* may be permitted to triumph over its ancient and implacable enemy *le mieux*. And if any of your friends come to you with the message that the problems of public life have become intolerable and require some immediate and total solution, I think you might do well to bear in mind the reply which a distinguished European statesman, Bismarck, once gave to certain of his more impatient and perfectionist contemporaries, who wanted him to solve all his country's problems right away, and entirely. "Let us leave just a few tasks," Bismarck suggested, "for our children to perform; they might be so bored in this world, if they had nothing to do."



THE CANDLE

by WALTER DE LA MARE

Day onto day
Life wastes and wanes,
Like a candle
Burning its wax away,
Till nought but charred wick
Remains.

Well, content would I be,
With a flame as still,
Some glint to have given
Whereby one who can see
Might work his inscrutable
Will:

If, perchance, long eternities
Hence, that strange mind
Might in trance
Of far-brooding memory turn,
To light me one instant — else
Blind.