

Class Oration 50 Years Later

By Alex R. Seith

Alex Seith, our Class Orator, is a lawyer in Chicago, where he is active in the Democratic Party and in communications. He ran for the Senate against Charles Percy in 1978 and covered the Reagan-Gorbachev summit in Geneva for a Chicago TV station. In his 1956 Class Oration, he asked the question whether a Yale education had prepared us for the life we were commencing after Commencement. From the following, it looks as though Yale did pretty well by us — at least in preparing us for the unexpected.

AS WE CELEBRATED our Yale graduation in 1956, the Class of '06 was gathering for its 50th reunion. Now, as we gather for our 50th reunion, another class of '06 celebrates its graduation.

In 1956 we looked at the Class of '06 and wondered what they thought of us. No doubt they wondered what we thought of them. Now, as we observe another Class of '06 and they observe us, is there any better mutual understanding than in 1956?

In both cases, the edge in understanding has to go to the older generation. In 1956 the Class of '06 had the perspective of 50 years more of living. Just as we do now.

That doesn't enable us to predict the exact shape of the future any better than the previous or current Class of '06. But 50 years of hindsight should give us better foresight than the newest graduates on the broad shape of the future.

To them some of our foresight will sound like empty clichés: Expect the unexpected. Life will change. Fast. And in more ways than you can imagine.

We don't need to apologize for speaking seeming platitudes. Because they have for us a depth of meaning, a richness and roundness of life they do not have for the young.

Adlai Stevenson was a better speech-maker than a politician in his campaigns for President in 1952 and 1956, the years we entered and left Yale.

In one of his speeches — and I paraphrase — Stevenson said many young people can restate the maxims of life they heard from elders, but did not fully understand. For the young, those maxims are mostly just words. For we who have lived longer those words are a kind of poetry, woven like tapestry and texture into the trials and tribulations, the triumphs and tears of a life full of living.

Look back to 1956 and see the parallels between what we have experienced and what the reunion Class of '06 had experienced in the previous 50 years.

In 1906, graduates of Yale and their contemporaries looked out at a world of conflict and calm. Conflict in America between reformers and stand-patters; calm among the nations of Europe, which had achieved relative peace since the Congress of Vienna in 1815. They believed peace would last indefinitely.

That was an illusion.

In 1956 we graduates again saw conflict between different reformers and different stand-patters. We looked abroad and saw a kind of calm but at a higher level of visible tension. The Soviets were aiming at us, and we at them, weapons of such destructive power that their massive use would mean the end of recorded civilization. That prospect was so mind boggling, many in our generation thought that fear would maintain the hybrid of calm and tension indefinitely.

That was an illusion. Just as it was to think the apparent calm in 1906 would not be shattered so soon.

Shattered it was in a World War that failed miserably to fulfill Woodrow Wilson's promise of a war to end all wars. Its terrible senseless killing and the punitive peace that followed brought forth the larger monstrosity of a Second World War with not just slaughter on the battlefields, but the near extermination of historic cities and the complete extermination of millions in the unspeakable horrors of the Holocaust.

John Gunther, famed journalist of a generation before ours, wrote a poignant essay titled "Death Be Not Proud." It was the heartbroken cry of a man whose son had died young — way too young.

At our graduation in 1956 many in the 50th reunion Class were fathers, or were friends of fathers, whose sons had died young — way too young — in defeating barbarians who inflicted devastation beyond the capacity of earlier barbarians by using, in Winston Churchill's words, "the lights of perverted science."

In the 50 years since our graduation many in our generation joined in defeating another perversion — the perversion called Communism. At Yale, we were well aware of George Orwell's *1984*, published in 1948. It depicted a Communist-like tyranny which twisted words to mean the opposite. Democracy meant dictatorship. Peace meant enslavement. The end of class elites meant a new class of the nomenclatura.

Sooner than we expected Communism was consigned to the ash heap of history — except in Pyongyang, Havana, perhaps Caracas, and on some American campuses.

There are striking differences between what happened in the last half-century and the preceding half-century. Yet amid the differences, there is one constant: Change. Major, rapid, unpredictable change.

When the earlier Class of '06 entered Yale in September 1902 no one had flown a heavier than air motorized vehicle. The next year, the Wright brothers did it. In its first attempt, their plane stayed aloft only 12 seconds, flew just 40 yards. But flight it was.

Change came fast. By the 50th reunion of the Class of '06, airplanes were routinely flying nonstop halfway around the globe in a few hours.

When we graduated, no one had yet put an object in orbit. The next year the Soviets did it. We quickly caught up and passed them, putting a man on the moon just 12 years later. Now we routinely put satellites into orbit to send television pic-

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tures, cell phone chatter, and military data half way around the globe in a few seconds.

Changes like that in technology have changed everyday life. So have changes in attitudes. Take Yale as an example. The Yale we graduated from in 1956, like the Yale of that year's 50th reunion Class, was a single-sex monastery of sorts. So it had been for more than 250 years.

Before our 15th reunion that changed — forever. It also changed, at different times, in most other single-sex institutions of higher learning in America.

In 1956, the 50th reunion Class remembered a Yale whose undergraduates were almost exclusively sons of the established elite. Nearly half our class were sons of parents who had established nothing — except good values and the ambition to see their sons become part of a new elite.

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Back then, we didn't call it diversity. Now we do. Today, diversity means much more than a simple distinction between those whose families have "arrived" and those seeking to arrive.

Not all changes at Yale have been for the better. And not all have been well implemented. But Yale has changed. And change it must. The Yale of 1906 could not prosper in the world of 2006. Even less so could the Yale of 1806 or 1706.

Yale has prospered and survived into its fourth century by unceasing dedication to the same guiding principle: Excellence. And by constant search for new ways to achieve excellence.

Recent studies suggest that those who led productive lives after Yale would probably have been productive after education elsewhere. Even so, Yale gave us something distinctive: Not just the appeal of excellence but the example of outstanding classmates, each seeking excellence in his own way.

Upon commencement of the current Class of '06, neither we nor they can predict the future any better than previous classes at their commencements could.

It would be fun to know what 2056 will be like when today's graduates look back during their 50th reunion, as we do now.

We can only hope that Yale and the world will have changed for the better and that these new Yale graduates, like so many before them, will have done their part to make the dream of improvement a reality.