

'73 Commencements, Free of Unrest, Dominated by Theme of Watergate

By EVAN JENKINS

In the quietest commencement season in years, the class of 1973 has emerged from the nation's colleges and universities amid exhortations to its members to become involved enough in the American system to help repair it.

The consensus of speakers who made the Watergate scandal the dominant single theme at commencements this year was that there was an unusually pressing need for repair. The scandal was a subject in more than half of about 150 addresses examined at random, and in the overwhelming majority of those devoted to topical as distinct from eternal concerns.

William D. Ruckelshaus, acting director of the Federal

Bureau of Investigation, referred at Ohio State University to "the tawdriness of current revelations." George W. Ball, Under Secretary of State in the Johnson Administration, spoke to students at Brandeis University about the "repulsive slime oozing out of Washington."

But there is no evidence that Watergate is an overriding concern among the graduates themselves.

The commencement ceremonies have been largely traditional and free of disruption, continuing a return to quiescence that began in 1970 after the campus cataclysm caused by the invasion of Cambodia and the killing of four students at Kent State University. A staff member at Columbia Uni-

versity observed, "This was the first year in five that spring hasn't been hell here."

President Nixon, at Florida Technological University in his only campus appearance this year, did not mention Watergate. But he noted that this is the first class in more than a decade to graduate at a time when the United States is not engaged in war in Vietnam, and the first in 32 years whose male members will not face the draft.

It is also the last class to have been on campus during the tragic spring of 1970. This spring, the continued bombing of Cambodia has stirred barely a murmur of student complaint.

Sobriety and skepticism seem to be the hallmarks of this year's graduates. They face a relatively tight job market and often intense competition for places in graduate and professional schools.

"It's somewhat brutal and it's becoming destructive," said William J. McGill, president of Columbia University.

Decline in Activism

As for skepticism, Dr. McGill and others consider it widespread and attribute it to disillusionment with student efforts of a few years ago to influence public affairs.

"One would have expected some kind of national impeach-the-President movement over Watergate, but it hasn't happened," Dr. McGill said. "The kids marched on Washington in 1970 and got patted on the head. These people want to change institutions, but they realize the process isn't accomplished by picketing and marching."

For all the decline in activism, many close observers reject the frequent comparison of this year's graduates with the "silent generation" of the nineteen-fifties. They see realism, not egoism, as the class's salient characteristic, and the desire for a new version of the good life — including some service to others — as its main motivation.

Still others fear the emergence of an alienated "disbelieving society" in an overreaction to the "youthquake" of the sixties.

'Tankful of Optimism'

Those phrases were used by Malcolm Moos, president of the University of Minnesota, in a telephone conversation about the class of '73.

"This class represents a generation that was born too old too soon," he said. "It has gone through an incredible corridor of mindless violence, and it has seen a lot and learned a lot in the process. It has learned that confrontation doesn't seem to work and that 'compromise' isn't necessarily a dirty word."

"But it has also come almost to the point where people don't believe in objective truth. The disbelieving society is the worst thing that can happen, and I hope it can be avoided. This is an unusual generation, tougher than most people suspect, and I have a tankful of optimism about it."

Dr. Moos was one of many commencement speakers who dwelt on the Watergate affair. He described it in harsh terms to seniors at the University of Notre Dame, declaring, "The sum of the allegations is that we were the victims of a coup d'etat or an attempted coup."

Chesterfield Smith, president-elect of the American Bar Association, told his audience at Norwich University in Vermont that Watergate "is, at best, a most awful and dis-



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H. R. Haldeman, former White House chief of staff, filming his daughter Saturday night at the University of Minnesota. She graduated summa cum laude with major in history.

gressing mess" that has "struck to the very heart of our democratic process."

But in passages that found echoes on campus after campus, Mr. Smith urged the graduates to find in the exposure of Watergate wrongdoing, evidence that the system can work, and to look on the affair as an opportunity.

"It may well be — and so I hope — that a new era of integrity in government will result

from these sordid events," Mr. Smith declared. But he said that to produce such an outcome, "those of us who are going into the world today and those of us who are already there must pick up the pieces."

The willingness of the class of '73 to share that task is impossible to gauge.

Roger Schecter, student speaker at the Columbian College of Arts and Sciences of George Washington University,

spoke with disdain of what he discerned as bankruptcy in leadership on all sides — the Republican Administration, the Democratic party, universities in general and his own in particular, and students.

He declared that "only those of us in this room and rooms like it across the nation" could reverse the pattern. But he concluded his talk with a question: Would it happen? That he did not attempt to answer.