

JUN 16 1974

James Reston

It's Not the Best Of Times, But Not The Worst Either

Washington

ART BUCHWALD'S light-hearted message to this year's college graduates was that "we've given you a perfect world, so don't louse it up," but most of the other commencement-day speakers seem to have been in a decidedly pessimistic mood.

We have lost our way, according to the common theme. Our institutions have failed us, our leaders have lied to us and broken their trust. We have changed the world faster than we have been able to change ourselves. So, it seems, we are a "nation of strangers," without faith in the old religious values or even in ourselves.

There are other themes, of course, but Cassandra seems to be in the main pulpit, pointing to the inflation, Watergate, Vietnam, easy sex, booze, and dope as symbols of a greedy and declining civilization.

Well, there is some truth in all this and we may ask, with Archibald MacLeish, "where has all the grandeur gone?" But this is only the dark side of the Republic.

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THE CONSTITUTION hasn't failed us — we're just hesitating to apply its spirit to the present scandals. Our institutions have not failed us — the courts, the Congress, the press, and the church are meeting their responsibilities today more seriously and effectively than they have in many years.



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Look at Judges Sirica and Gesell in Washington if you think the idea of decency and justice (or even the instinct of nobility and grandeur) are dead in America. Listen to the states, passing tough new laws to correct and control the scandals of campaign financing.

In this sense, Watergate is not killing us but may be saving us. It has revived the conscience and emboldened the spirit of the states, the Congress, the press, and the church, and the reforming impulse of America is alive again. Practical remedies are now in train — not the ideals of perfectionists, not as much reform or progress as the times require, but still more reform and progress than we have seen in Washington in two generations.

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THE OPTIMISTIC view, of course, can obviously be challenged — it will be a slow business to get our practices in line with our ideals — but the college graduates of 1974 have a brighter prospect than the graduates of the 1960's or the early 1970's.

They are on the whole a lucky class. They do not face the military draft. They have problems with inflation, interest rates and jobs, but unlike their parents or their grandparents, they do not face the disruption of great wars or economic depressions.

Sometimes they talk as if they envied the simple adversity and discipline of the past. And one can understand this, for they have the harder challenge of relative prosperity and freedom, but this class of 1974, the baby-boom generation that missed the big wars and Vietnam, can certainly look forward to the end of the century with a reasonable prospect of peace and economic if not spiritual security.

For the first time since the graduates of 1974 were children, the great nations are talking seriously, now about the control of military arms, and there is at least a pause or truce in the fighting in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, Africa, and on the Indian subcontinent.

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NOTHING HAS BEEN settled, but everything is under discussion. All human relationships between men and women, between the big powers and the small powers, within the family, the university, and the church are being analyzed and disputed. In short, we are coming into an age of philosophy when it is possible to talk about the meaning and quality and environment of life.

That is not a bad graduating present for the Class of '74. My brother Buchwald is probably right, as usual. He was kidding the Class of '74, but he had a point. They have not been given a "perfect world" but they have been given a better chance than most, and as Buchwald says, it would be a pity if they "loused it up."

New York Times