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Remarks at Commencement, delivered on June 9, 1973

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REMARKS BY AREND D. LUBBERS
PRESIDENT, GRAND VALLEY STATE COLLEGES
AT COMMENCEMENT, JUNE 9, 1973

Commencement is a time when speakers are supposed to be profound. Whether they are or not doesn't matter. The people assembled are there for a purpose other than listening to an address. Yet, somehow, for us old commencement buffs, it is inappropriate for such exercises to pass without some sort of verbal exhortation. You will notice in your programs what I have to say is entitled "Remarks." That is done so that you will not be frightened by the prospect of receiving half an hour of advice from me, and to remind me not to give you half an hour of advice.

Commencement speakers generally use the platform for one of three purposes: (1) to make some public statement about their field of interest which may or may not be related to the graduates; (2) to tell the graduates what to do with their lives, a rather difficult task if the graduates are many and varied; or (3) to analyze and describe the current and future society so that at least a final gesture has been made to let the graduates know what they are in for. The first requires an eminence I do not possess, the second I did last year, and so my remarks will fall, more or less, into the third category.

My analysis of current and coming society reflects two overriding conditions of my generation's adult, professional life. We have worked as adults only in a time when the United States was the dominant international power. As the result of this power as well as the energy of the people, we have accumulated wealth and resources to maintain an unparalleled level of

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human consumption. As a nation, we have always assumed that our dollar will buy us what we want and our power, less arrogantly flaunted than by many empires and nations in the past, will give us security and access to what we want. My generation is conditioned psychologically to be part of a dominant system and generally to have its own way about a standard of living. We are not unwilling to share, but we share on our own terms. I believe the recent youth rebellion was saying something about that psychological condition.

The excesses and often obscene aspects of the rebellion tend to make most in my generation recoil in disgust and find it impossible to learn much from the graceless discourtesy of the militants. We tend to tune them off or scurry around even violating the law to protect ourselves from what we consider an imminent threat to the system which has provided our power and standard of living. If we heed the more modulated tones, however, we hear sounds and sense feelings that may harmonize with the political and economic realities that we must understand if ours is to be a greater, rather than lesser, society.

The moderates working out their rebellion against authority claim that power must be used differently. They further insist that unlimited consumption is both immoral and a sure road to personal unhappiness and non-fulfillment. The political and economic realities are that the United States, though not weaker as a nation, is more dependent upon other nations for resources to satiate its appetite for the good life. An additional fact is that other people agree that much that characterizes our standard of living is desirable and they are beginning to compete with us for the resources that we want in ever increasing amounts.

Certainly economic dependency changes the nature of the international power game. Also, competition for traditional resources may make them more dear to those of us who have pretty well enjoyed what we wanted in the past.

A few days ago, I heard a speaker state that in 1940 the average American devoured 50 pounds of beef a year. Today the beef consumption is 130 pounds a year. The average in the rest of the world is less per capita than ours in 1940, but it is rising rapidly. No one has figured out how to make one cow produce more than one calf a year. Even if cows and bulls work overtime, it is easy to see the proportions of the problem as world demand for beef increases. The price alone will limit our consumption.

When the nonsense of the youth rebellion is flushed away, we are left with two legitimate questions: (1) What is the nature of United States power and how should it be exercised? (2) How should the United States handle its natural resources and what is our fair share of the world's natural resources? These questions should not be hard to face up to if we agree to three adjustments in our national mind set.

First, we must see our role as a great power altered from that of managing director to influential partner. I see no loss in prestige or international responsibility. Many nations are still dependent upon our strength but in different ways and degrees. Economic interdependence is responsible for much of this change, and we are a major perpetrator of it. The growing interdependence may have its good side. For years, the United States and Russia have not declared open war on one another because of mutual deterrent forces. Now we may

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want to draw on Russian oil and natural gas resources, and they need our grain. It certainly is an improvement to live at peace on the basis of mutual need rather than fear. But this is new to us. How much can old enemies be trusted? Which of our old policies should we retain? Which should be discarded?

Second, we are at a point where our consumption of resources is increasing in geometric proportion. Even if we find immediate solutions for shortages of traditional energy sources, metals, and foodstuffs, we know that consumption unlimited of present resources in the forms we know them is not a provable theorem. Slowly, more people begin to understand there is no better time to re-examine our style of consumption. We are not at the point where self-denial is required to any degree, but conspicuous over-consumption is something too few people are concerned about. It is appalling to observe the foodstuffs that become garbage, the paper that is wasted, the gas and oil consumed to heat seldom used rooms, and the metals shaped into unnecessary gadgets.

I cannot honestly advocate the ascetic life. Our economy is based on the production of goods, most of which allow us a freedom from drudgery of mind and body. We cannot afford, nor do we want, an iconoclastic, self-righteous movement that puts us out of business. We do want a nation of people to pause as they consume to see if their style of consumption really makes them happy and protects the future for themselves and others. Thoughtful, fair solutions to problems of consumption will give us the kind of self-confidence a society must have to survive as free and energetic in the future.

Third, the people should insist that more effort be used in finding substitutes for the resources we are now using in vast quantities. Conservation and sacrifice forced on us by necessity or voluntarily entered into should take place with the understanding that our creativity, planning, and money are going into the search for new ways to provide increasing numbers of people here and everywhere with the means of gaining or maintaining mobility, opportunity, health, and legitimate leisure and comfort. Societies have declined when the energy source of their greatness dried up or was overcome by a strong force. Our society has been unique in finding substitutes or replacements for that which is short of supply or outmoded -- synthetic fibers, etc. Now, after reassessment of what we really need and want, we must find a way of securing and producing it in quantity and in a way that does not deprive the rest of the world from realizing justifiable aspirations. Though our technology has always won out in the past, we are reaching the point of its greatest test. Can it find a way to maintain for us the good life without requiring us to use a disproportionate share of the world's resources? Is our space exploration dedicated to that end? Are our military expenditures? We must be a nation in search, and that is not the most secure time for a people.

There is something exciting about uncertainty. If strength of mind and spirit are not lacking, if the means and systems of maintaining orderly society are not destroyed, and if there is still a pervasive desire for justice, the time of uncertainty can be one of opportunity.

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In many respects, those of you on the college scene are well equipped for the present uncertainty. You have been part of or exposed to a segment of American life that has been relatively sensitive to the need for a shift in the American mind set in regard to international posture and to consumption and protection of natural resources. The task of the thoughtful and committed is not to alter the system radically, but rather to help society face contemporary realities about international politics and national expectations. I hope all of us here are amongst the thoughtful and committed.