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Address at commencement exercises of Lander College

Strom Thurmond

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It is hard for me to realize that probably more than half the lives of you members of the graduating class have been lived in what we call the Atomic Age. It is hard to realize because the beginning of the Atomic Age was only 10 short years ago.

But the Atomic Age has come to mean much more than simply the knowledge of how to use the atom for destruction or for good. This is a dynamic era of material progress in many fields. Human beings are undergoing many new experiences as a result of newly learned facts. Despite its tremendous importance to the peoples of the world, the discovery of atomic power for practical use is a symptom of this era of inquiry and progress instead of the ultimate definition of the Age.

There are many other symptoms. All are related because all are new departures in the thinking and the actions of human beings such as you. Progress in a dynamic age cannot depend on one field alone.

Let us consider a few illustrations of what I mean.

Distance once was a concept of major importance. Distance was the factor separating the people of the United States from the other peoples of the world. We formerly measured distance in terms of miles when, actually, those miles sometimes meant years or even ages of time between ourselves and some of the other peoples of the world.

We would say that India was 10,000 miles away. But in terms of our relations with the Indians, India really was years away because our relations with and our knowledge of those people were so...
remote. The same was true of the Japanese, the Chinese, the Russians and the people of many other lands.

But we have seen distance shrink until the world has become a much smaller globe than it was 10 years ago. Now it is so small, in fact, that only hours separate us from almost any country in the world.

Distance now must be considered in terms of modern airplanes and the time they require to fly from one place to another. Miles mean little when a few hours can be transformed into the crossing of entire continents and oceans of space.

During the past 10 years, airplanes have been developed from craft which traveled at comparatively slow speeds to swift carriers which girdle the globe. Jet planes have blasted through the barrier of sound at speeds of perhaps 1000 miles per hour. Turbo-jet engines are being used on regular passenger transport planes.

Already atomic power is being used to operate our nation's newest submarine and several others are being constructed. A few weeks ago President Eisenhower asked Congress to appropriate funds for the construction of an atomic-powered ship and one of the Committees is now considering the building of such a vessel to carry cargo in our merchant fleet.

The unusual developments of a few months ago are still marvelous to us but we discuss them almost as though they were ordinary. We have become accustomed to near-miracles in everyday living.

But perhaps you are thinking that all of my illustrations/
deal with the development of potential destructive forces. I re­mind you/that in the same way atomic energy and air power can be destructive, they can also be used to benefit humanity.

Atomic energy is being employed in medicine/for treatment of certain killing diseases. Industrialists also are experimenting with the use of atomic energy for the running of engines/and for many other purposes/which we shall no doubt be able to use ourselves within a few years.

The unfortunate fact/is that it was necessary/first/to devote attention to the destructive uses of the atom. But, paradoxically, had we not been forced to learn to use atomic energy in war, it might have been many years before we learned to employ the atom for good purposes.

But perhaps I am devoting too much time to atomic energy. There are many symptoms of this era to be found in our way of life/during this period in which you have grown from childhood.

Our doctors have learned to conquer diseases/which once were believed to be almost hopeless. Tuberculosis has greatly decreased in this country/and persons who do contract tuberculosis/no longer feel themselves hopelessly lost. Pneumonia once was feared as the agent of sudden death. But the development of the aptly named wonder drugs/has virtually eliminated the dangers of this once-dread disease.

Vaccines have been developed to prevent many once-fatal diseases. Some of the preventives were common-place to your parents, but there are new ones. Dr. Salk has given us the latest of the vaccines with his anti-polio shots. True, there is still
some controversy about these shots and the danger attendant to being treated with them. That has been the history of the process of refinement of most medicines which we now accept as everyday treatments.

I am confident that our medical scientists will continue, as they have in the past, to make giant strides in the constant war against disease. Our life expectancy increased by approximately 5 years in the 10-year period between 1940 and 1950, largely as a result of increased scientific knowledge of physical care. Life expectancy in this country is almost 70 years.

Earlier, I spoke of the development of transportation. Just as swift as the improvements in transportation have been the inventions in the field of communications. We have come a long way from the old telephone on the wall which was operated by a hand-cranked generator, and the telegraph key which tapped out Morse code, although these instruments are still used in some instances.

Two years ago, color television was a thing of the future. Today it is a reality. We can view the pictures presented in the TV studio either on color or black-and-white television sets. The miracle of television itself has come into general use in what is called the post-war period since 1945. You think no more of switching on your TV picture and sound than your parents did 25 years ago of turning on the radio.

Few of us understand its operation, but all of us receive the benefits of the marvelous coaxial cable which carries many signals at the same time. Telephone and telegraph signals are micro-waved from one point to another, miles away, without the use of connecting
wires. It is usual rather than unusual to comment to our friends when we talk with them miles away that they sound just like they are in the next room.

Of course, as I speak, you may be thinking of many other great scientific developments which I have not mentioned. They are endless.

But the important matter to consider is whether we have advanced as human beings in a great democracy as fast as we have been able to invent and employ such devices for comfort and pleasure.

Let me point out to you that none of these scientific advances embraced new principles. All of them had existed in nature through the centuries, awaiting discovery.

In the same way, principles relating to our form of government and our basic beliefs in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution have remained constant. Time does not alter principles. If they were sound principles in 1776 and 1787, they are good for us too.

We should not let changing world conditions confuse us. You will hear people who say that our Constitution is outmoded and that new applications of its meaning are necessary. They will try to persuade you that the Constitution really did not mean what it said; that it should be considered in the light of social progress.

But I say to you that we would not have made such great strides in the many other fields of endeavor through the more than a century and a half of government under our Constitution, unless we had
followed its principles faithfully. Just as scientific advances have been made because the scientists adhered strictly to the principles of physics and chemistry, so have we made progress in the democracy of the United States by following the proven tenets of the Constitution. If we are able to follow the laws of science as ferretted out of nature by experiments through the ages, so we must follow the laws of democracy as our forefathers did. Their noble experiment has been proved by the tests of time.

Time has not created new principles of nature to enable men to fly through the air, to discover germ killers or to communicate across vast distances. It has simply taken human beings some six thousand years of creation to understand some of these wonders well enough to use them.

The development of a democracy like ours also took time. But our forefathers, spurred by persecution, refined the basic principles of representative government well in the drafting of the Constitution. It is short, simple and understandable.

The people and the Congress insisted that certain matters be spelled out in the Constitution. These matters about which the people were so concerned in 1789 are stated in the Bill of Rights.

These rights of the people include freedom of religion, speech, the press and the right to petition against grievances—the right to bear arms—protection against quartering of soldiers on personal property—protection against unwarranted search and seizure of persons and their homes—against twice being tried for the same offense—guarantee of a speedy trial, trial by jury and protection against excessive bail or cruel punishment.
The Bill of Rights also provides that the listing of certain rights in the Constitution shall not be construed to deny others not mentioned specifically.

Finally, it declares that rights not delegated to the United States by the Constitution are reserved to the States and the people.

Never in all history has any other nation succeeded in attaining the sublime heights of democracy embodied in our Constitution. Our forefathers fought to secure the rights they drafted into the Constitution. Through the last Century and this one our ancestors and we have fought to preserve the freedom necessary to enjoy the rights written into and guaranteed by the Constitution.

We must constantly refresh our memories of how the Constitution was created. We must be alert against the glib appeals of those who would destroy our Constitution by alterations which would destroy its basic principles. And we must guard against attacks on our Constitution by the circumvention of its basic principles.

Weaknesses or faults which may exist in democracy can not be cured by destruction. A doctor would not use a poison to cure a disease if it killed his patient in the process.

Your generation is fortunate that our government has stood the tests of time. No other nation in all the history of the world has been able to attain such high standards itself, do so much for the peoples of the world and yet keep secure our own freedom.

I know you have been instructed in the principles to which I
have referred. I am confident you will strive to protect them as your forefathers fought to secure the recognition of these principles.

My congratulations to each of you. The recognition you receive here today is well-deserved. I wish you well as you take up new tasks for the future.

THE END