

Commencement Remarks to the Class of 2002 by Dean Anthony T. Kronman

We are approaching the end of this ceremony and, with it, the end of another academic year. The academic year is oddly out of step with the year we mark on our calendars. The first ends now, in the spring, before the second has reached its midpoint, and begins again in the fall, when the calendar year is declining.

But both years--calendar and academic--remind us of some enduring feature in the background of our lives. As fall declines to winter, and winter yields to spring, we are reminded and reassured of the permanence of the world, of the cosmological world with all its cycles and seasons, of our earthly home under the stars above, those fixed celestial points that Plato called the "visible eternal."

And the academic year, with its rhythms and routines, its familiar beginnings and endings, reminds and reassures us of a different kind of permanence, as necessary to our spiritual well being. It reminds us of the permanence of those human institutions, the work of men and women through generations of attention and care, whose durability is as vital to the realm of culture, the human home of art and science and law, as the durability of the stars is to the natural world that forms the beautiful but indifferent backdrop to all our human strivings.

And so, with this ceremony, which completes another academic year, we mark something permanent in our lives, and celebrate the continuity of a great institution whose life is longer than any of ours? and not subject to the same mortal limits.

But of course we all know that the distinction is relative, that institutions too are born and die, like the mortal men and women who inhabit them. We even know now, what Plato didn't, that the changeless stars above have a life-history of their own, that his "visible eternal" is infected with change. "Even in you," the poet Rilke writes, "time flickers." We know that the natural and cultural worlds are historical, and that the calendars we use to mark their seasons, so regular and repetitious, spread a veil of permanence over a process of change.

Into the academic year we now conclude, history has come charging like a bull. As the year began, Yale was preparing to celebrate the three hundredth anniversary of its founding. What more potent symbol could one find for the amazing durability of this institution, older than the American republic? But before the academic year was two weeks old, our world had been shaken and our easy confidence in the permanence of so much we take for granted--our security, our freedom to move about and do as we wish, the solidity of the modern nation state, the whole general ameliorative tendency of human affairs in a new global civilization--our confidence in all this had been shattered. On one morning, in a single hour, we were reminded of the fragility and vulnerability of the human world, of all its habits and reliable routines, on whose permanence we depend in every plan we make and commitment we assume.

In the terrible wreckage of September 11th, this too must be counted among our losses: the loss of a world that seemed less threatened than it was, and more invulnerable to history's transforming power, which is not always gentle or kind. Since September 11th, we have lived in history's glare, and I do not expect we shall escape it again in my lifetime.

But if we lost much on September 11th, we have recovered much as well. From the wreckage we have recovered things we had lost or forgotten--above all, a sense of the value and dignity of the civilization that came under attack that morning, and of the central place of law in that civilization. For ours is, preeminently, a civilization of laws, committed to the ideal of universal human dignity, which our attackers deny, and to the protection of the

very freedoms they exploited to bring death to so many innocent people, living their lives as free men and women do. It is a civilization committed to the ideal of justice, and to the establishment of orderly processes and open institutions for the practical administration of that ideal. It is a civilization founded on the belief that the law and its protections are not the privileged possession of some class or caste, of one particular community or nation or sect, but of humanity, to whom the law belongs. It is a civilization dedicated to widening the authority of law, until its promise to protect the freedom of men and women everywhere has been fulfilled. It is a civilization with a mission, and a duty, and after September 11th everyone in the world knows it is a civilization with enemies, who would destroy it if they could.

America is an imperfect nation. It has not yet lived up to its own ambitions in the law. But America has always been ennobled by its ambitions, even as it has fallen short of their achievement, and no ambition of the American people is more honorable than their ambition to be a people living under law. Many things were lost on September 11th. Many lives were shattered, and many confidences destroyed. But the ambition to be a people living under law, and to carry the light of the law throughout the world--that ambition endures. One might even say, perhaps, that it was lost, and has been found, and being found is stronger than before. Whatever uncertainties lie ahead, for America and the world, this much is clear, clearer than it has ever been before: that our civilization of laws is the finest thing we have to show for our adventure as a people, and worth defending with every ounce of wisdom and imagination and courage we can summon.

To the students who are graduating today, I say: the defense will be yours to conduct. You inherit a great civilization, ennobled by high ideals, committed to freedom and the protections of law that permit it to flourish, at a moment of uncertainty and doubt, when the future is less clear than it seemed at the start of this academic year. The fate of that civilization depends on the exertions of those who believe in its values, and especially of those, like you, who have been entrusted with the protection of the institutions of law which we--which you--must honor more fully at home and encourage more generously abroad.

You have been given an assignment for which you did not ask. But all great assignments are like that, and knowing you as I do, I have not the slightest doubt you will rise to the challenge. I'm counting on you. We're all counting on you. The world is counting on you. God bless you, and godspeed.