WHERE ARE WE GOING?

Address to the Students of Carnegie Institute of Technology at Carnegie Day, November 26, 1946

By DR. ROBERT E. DOHERTY, President

Let me ask you to call up in your minds the picture of social and economic conditions in our country and in the world. Then while you are looking at this picture, let me ask you a question: where do you think that we as a people are going? Where do you, individually, come into this picture? You are in the boat; you have to go wherever it goes. But it is part your boat, and you can have a say in setting the course. What do you hope to do about it? How can you prepare to do it?

Let us consider the question—where are we going? Somebody must answer this question, because inevitably we shall go somewhere, even if we drift. I for one don’t know, and I don’t know anybody who can tell me. I don’t even know where we, as a people, really want to go, because we as a people haven’t made up our minds. But we think we know. We cite the Constitution and the Bill of Rights and the Four Freedoms and free enterprise and the rights of Labor, and so on; and then we say, “These represent what we want.” Now I believe that the great majority of American people do want these things. But they want a lot of other things too—things that are inconsistent with these. We are confused—terribly confused—about the difference between what we want and what it takes to get it. How many millions of people have accepted and try to live by the false doctrine that they can get something for nothing—and still be polite about it; that they can get the fruits of somebody else’s work without doing equivalent work; or that the fruits of a great national economy can be sacrificed for the temporary benefit of their own group; or that they can keep freedom for themselves and yet deny it to others? No, we not only don’t know where we are going; we don’t even know where we are. Like Columbus in one version of his voyage; when he went, he didn’t know were he was going; when he got there he didn’t know where he was; and when he returned, he didn’t know where he had been!

We must become clear on where we want to go—clear on purpose. I wish to rivet down in your minds an old but very important idea—namely, that lack of purpose leads to chaos. Or stated the other way around, clear and definite purpose, if recognized in practice, leads to accomplishment. And this, let me remind you, is just as true for bad purpose as for good purpose. Each of you, I am sure, knows persons who have floundered in their lives, lived in chaos, because they couldn’t make up their minds about anything. But there are several degrees of floundering. I dare say that each one of you is now struggling with purpose. Many of you, of course, have settled on a choice of career, but important as that is, it represents only a small segment of life purpose. And your struggle with other questions gives you at least a feel of the chaos that goes with lack of purpose. It becomes actual chaos only if you finally give up and become accustomed to living in confusion.

On the other hand, you have undoubtedly known of persons among your acquaintances and in biographies who represent the opposite, who achieved a rounded-out philosophy of life and thus also achieved, if not great wealth, then great satisfactions that make life worth while.

For further illustration turn to organizations. Whether it is a group, a community, a nation, or the world, the idea holds. Consider a group—the labor union, for example. Here you find in most cases definite purpose that is recognized in practice by the group. What else do you find? I will tell you: you find effective accomplishment. Or, take the business organization. Here also if you find clear and definite purpose that is recognized in practice you usually find also effective accomplishment. If individual purpose and national purpose and world purpose were as clear and as fully accepted in practice, so would be their accomplishments. The point I am making here is that lack of purpose leads to chaos, and conversely that a purpose which is
clear and accepted leads to accomplishment.

But obviously this idea needs further qualification. Mind you, I said of such labor unions and such business organizations that their accomplishments were "collective"; I did not say they were always wholly good; indeed, they may be very bad in both cases. Not only must there be purpose that is clear and accepted in practice; it must be good purpose, and it must also be related to other purposes. For instance, the purpose of the labor union to obtain proper wages and working conditions for its members certainly is a good purpose. What is bad in many cases is that the purpose evidently omits recognition of any higher purpose; from the point of view of one type of labor leader, now unfortunately often in the saddle, the purpose is evidently the primary purpose, it transcends all others; and being primary, it demands that the union let to such a leader do everything in its power to accomplish it, regardless of the rights of others, regardless of a higher purpose of the community or nation. Some examples are the recent power strike in Pittsburgh, the maritime strike, the present coal strike.

Thus, in addition to the requirement that the purpose be clear and accepted in practice, is the requirement that there be an intelligent relationship between the purposes of individuals, of communities, of States, and of the nation. In other words, there must be not only purpose but a hierarchy of purpose—a structure that makes sense as a whole in which at successive levels the purposes are reasonably consistent and coherent, and thus related to the great over-all national aims which we as a people profess and which, as they are stated in the Constitution, represent the highest moral purposes.

Now this, I must confess, is an idealistic concept, but it is also a realistic one—one that thinking people must see and continue to hold in mind. Because if they do, then perhaps they can figure out where we are going, or want to go, and when enough individuals know that, there will be reason for hope that those communities, and the nation which these individuals partly constitute will also know that purpose is not the only way and hold this concept in mind as we examine further into this problem of where we are going as a nation and what you can do about it.

I have said that we need purpose, good purpose, a hierarchy of purpose. We do have now a statement of national purpose—the Constitution—but we need something besides its very general sailing directions. Because all that we now pay attention to in practice is the direction in which the ship must go when it is about to sink, and the imperative duties of the crew under that condition. These particular directions under such circumstances are clear, definite, and recognized. We had a chance to feel the weight of them during the late war. However, before and after the impending disaster, the ship's course is forgotten and the duties become directed to the day's business on board in which each group sees the greatest advantage for itself.

What we need, therefore, alongside the Bill of Rights is a Bill of Responsibilities. Wherever there is a right, there is a commensurate responsibility; and hence there must be also a hierarchy of responsibility to correspond with the hierarchy of purpose. This old truth is threadbare but still important. But we heed little emphasis upon our responsibilities—especially responsibilities to the great national aims under which we profess to live and to the welfare of the community in which we make our homes. The responsibilities we hear most about these days are the responsibilities of the labor leader to his union, the congressman to his constituents or to the bloc that supported him, the company to its stockholders, the pressure group to its members, the individual to his family and employer. Let me hasten to say that these are not bad responsibilities; they are legitimate and they are necessary. But they are not primary; they do not come first. We have demonstrated in four great wars that when our life as a free people is manifestly threatened with disaster, all of these other responsibilities are actually secondary. The incredible fact is, however, that just as soon as the immediate danger is removed, we forget the primary responsibility. It seems that the danger must be not only present; it must be in the form of a clearly impending disaster. Otherwise we shut our eyes and let the insidious, but real, dangers creep up on us. Indeed we insist on it. We set in motion forces of internal disruption, and without the restraint and direction which this primary responsibility would provide if it were recognized, we assume the dog-cat-dog attitude and let secondary responsibilities completely rule our lives.

The Civil War is a good illustration for this habit I am discussing is not new with the American people. By 1861 internal forces had grown until the condition I have mentioned was fulfilled—the condition that is necessary for the recognition of primary responsibility: disaster was clearly impending. Then there was a shift in responsibilities; then our homes,
our business, even life itself became secondary. When the war was over, what happened? Did we continue to face that primary responsibility which Lincoln to the end certainly did continue to see and to urge upon us? Did we follow his purpose to rebuild the nation strong by nursing the wounds of war and helping the South, as well as the North, to restore itself? No, we let bitterness of group against group hold sway and thus created cleavages that still persist after these 80 years.

And we are doing the same thing today. World War II having now ended, we find that bitterness and strife and internal chaos characterize the national scene. Deep cleavages are developing—have developed—and I don’t believe we can stand them now as we have in the past. The rapid pace today and the magnitude and character of the forces involved will, I fear, bring chaos if we continue to drift without clear over all purpose and clear responsibility. But we are still running true to form.

What I have been saying is that if we hope to endure as a free people, we must as a people learn how to put first things first, how to keep our dominant, primary purpose always clear, how to recognize our responsibilities as well as our rights, and in this way learn how to adjust the policies and procedures of our daily lives and business to accord with that purpose. This means rational discrimination among values and purposes and responsibilities—(doing which, let me remind you, is) an intellectual act—and it also means thinking out accordingly what to do and this too is an intellectual act. In no other way can we know where we are going nor how to get there; in no other way that I see may we avoid chaos.

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Where do you come into this picture? What can you do about it? Perhaps what I just said may have given you a clue—namely, that intellectual effort on a high plane is absolutely necessary. So I can tell you that your role must be a significant one, and I correctly urge you to understand and remember this. Let us now consider what that role must be.

When I asked the question, "Where are we today?" I meant that somebody had to answer it. But who? If we lived under a totalitarian regime, the answer would be simple, but the way we are set up to run the country there is no single person or pressure group that can answer the question, although if I may be facetious about a serious matter, there have been those who have tried to. Our democracy rests upon the assumption that the people themselves are competent to make the great policy decisions that determine the course of our national life. And, may God bless them, they have demonstrated more than once that they will do so if they understand. Sometimes they take decisive action when they don’t fully understand but know only that something is wrong. We have just had such a demonstration at the polls.

But, as in this case, the trouble is too frequently that they don’t understand all that they should. Their understanding is of surface conditions, not of basic issues; it is, for instance, understanding of personal frustrations and hardships caused by strikes and too much government meddling, not understanding of the fundamental responsibilities that were being violated. Moreover, at the speed of change today, by the time surface conditions become so intolerable that they drive people to the polls it can well be too late to make a correction.

So one does not have to look far to find a fundamental difficulty that now stands in the way of the successful operation of our plan of democracy. It is that great policy questions are extremely complex, and the intellectual and moral requirements for dealing with them are therefore very suture. To define the issues clearly and precisely, to weigh them against our great national purpose in the first instance—the purpose for which, it need be, we will fight—and in the second instance, against all other considerations; and then to devise means for helping the people to understand these issues, and practical plans for solving the problem—doing these things requires extraordinary intellectual capacity and discipline—such indeed as may not be expected on the part of all citizens, but certainly may be expected from some.

If there is an answer to this difficulty, as I believe there is, the hope for its realization lies in men and women who have had the special privilege of cultivating their intellectual powers in college and who thus also have responsibility for using them: responsibility for helping to formulate policies and procedures, responsibility for supporting good measures and interpreting them to their fellow citizens; and responsibility for taking an active hand in civic and community affairs. If we had this intellectual power and moral conviction at the sources of policy formulation—that is, in congressional and other legislative committees and in all positions of group leadership—and if we had also a sprinkling of informed and thinking citizens among the populace who were actively interested in the responsibilities I have mentioned, then we should
have, I believe, a solution to the present basic weakness of our democracy. Then perhaps the electorate could be expected to understand better earlier and, therefore, to vote more intelligently. Then perhaps also we could give a more positive answer to the question, “Where are we going?”

But this whole concept is predicated upon the assumption that such intellectual and moral leadership as I have mentioned will be available. It thus assumes that the colleges will educate such people. You are such people, and that is the answer to the question, “Where do you come into the picture?”

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But you have to do more than merely enter the picture; you have to prepare for it. But how? Where can you find the time? Is such preparation worth the time and effort that could otherwise be put on your technical studies? There is a good answer to this question, and I shall try to give it to you.

It is probably not the answer you would give. You wish to become professional men and women as quickly as possible. And this, you probably believe, should mean spending practically all of your time on technical studies. Many of you look down your educational road in a straight, narrow line and see at the far end only one spot—the technical spot—in what is actually a large professional area, and thus tend to place serious and unnecessary limitations on the development of your powers.

Let me ask you, What are techniques and technical knowledge for? They are media of expression and interpretation. They are very important—indeed essential—but they do not constitute the whole of professional competence, unless indeed one considers a professional man to be no more than a technical craftsman. I said that they are media of expression and interpretation, but of what? Of something a mind somewhere has conceived.

The source of creative professional power is the cultivated mind. It is not one that is merely full of technical information and of knowledge of technical routines; it is one that has enough of these PLUS creative vision, analytical power, human understanding, a perspective of social and economic evolution, and the power to continue to learn and to develop in all of these respects. Such a mind has the capacity for creating, for solving problems—whether in art, engineering, science, or other fields represented at C.I.T.—and thus the capacity also for arriving itself at something worth expressing or interpreting.

Let me call your attention to the fact that these requisites that I have suggested are only partly in terms of knowledge; they are primarily qualities of mind—qualities that must be achieved, won by continued devotion and effort. They cannot be learned out of a book alone nor by one's being told about them.

Then there are two other things to be said about them. First, they are just as important for professional accomplishment as for competence as a citizen. This is true. I contend, for all professions, but it is especially true for engineers, for their work at genuine professional level cannot be separated from the human, social, and economic factors. And secondly, these qualities cannot be cultivated in technical studies alone. The beautiful thing about them is that, being qualities of mind and not mere knowledge of subject matter, they are a common denominator of all fields and are developed the stronger as they are cultivated in more fields.

I have already suggested that their cultivation is not easy. It is a long, hard pull, but so worth while!

It means, in the first instance, the establishment of purpose, and this is not done by a New Year's resolution. It must be built step by step, by trial and error, by weighing values against experience and new understanding, by fusing purposes together so that they make sense as a whole. I have mentioned a hierarchy of purpose, and it is as essential for the individual as for communities—perhaps more so, for building it is of course building a philosophy of life.

As you build it, certainly one early element will be your educational purpose which will become broadened to encompass these qualities of mind I have mentioned. And a second early element, I hope, will be a growing sense of responsibility to use your increasing intellectual powers in the interests of your community and country as well as of your personal careers. And that is my idea of how you can prepare to enter the picture that I have presented this morning.

I want you to become such professional men and women and such competent citizens, who will match privilege with responsibility and thus make the highest possible contribution to your profession and to your country; and thus will also enjoy the satisfactions of a full and creative life. And if you try as hard to become such professional men and women as your institution is trying to help you do so, you will succeed.