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Untitled Speech by Harold Shaft, Winter Commencement: January 26, 1963

Harold Shaft

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COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

An address by Harold Shaft, Grand Forks
attorney, at the University of North Dakota
Commencement, Jan. 26, 1963.

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On a bright June day in 1922 - more than 40 years ago - at another commencement program of this University, I spoke on behalf of my graduating class.

I still have a mildewed copy of that speech.

May I quote a paragraph from that deathless prose of 40 years ago?

"In each of us lies the power within the next 10 or 20 years to be an outstanding citizen in the community we choose. We can, if we will, all be leaders.... The range of opportunity is boundless. The school boards, the commercial clubs, the public offices, the women's clubs, the YMCA's, the YWCA's, the churches, all are crying for men and women of strength of purpose, of vision, of training, who are not afraid to work..."

Brave words. Confident prophecies. The voice of inexperience.

And yet all those brave prophecies were to come true.

Out of that North Dakota Class of 1922, and those who followed us, have come captains of industry, presidents of great universities, governors, Supreme Court Justices, Bishops of the church, scientists of note, international bankers, educators of national stature, great physicians, leading lawyers, engineers who have designed incredible bridges, pioneers in aviation, military heroes and leaders out of all proportion to our numbers, men and women recognized nationally as leaders in their fields. And those less spectacular things I mentioned - the school boards and churches and YMs and YWs and local public offices - they have not been neglected, for on every hand we find our own men and women in positions of respect and leadership.

Today I am as proud of my classmates and those who followed us, as I was confident of them forty years ago.

They have exceeded even my youthful expectations.

They have done well -- for the class of 1922.

But that is not enough for 1963.

I remember a freshman indoctrination speech of President McVey, in which he said it would be the purpose of the University to equip its graduates with basic and fundamental knowledge of their subjects, but more important than that, to equip them with inquiring minds.

He said that no one could hope, in a few years of college, to learn the thousandth part of the available learning in any field.

But, he said, if a man or woman is equipped with an inquiring mind, his education will continue to the day he dies.

Dr. McVey and the other educators of that generation did equip their students with inquiring minds.

In the ensuing forty years, those inquiring minds have changed the world.

Find an old dictionary or encyclopedia with a copyright of about 1922.

Look up some of the words which fill our conversation in 1963.

Try - just try - to find something about television and radar and laser, about transistors and diodes and solar cells, and antibiotics and jet aircraft and atomic fission and fusion, about hi-fi reproduction and frozen foods and polio vaccine and electric refrigeration and radiant ovens, about ready-mix cakes and parking meters and power mowers and sewage lagoons, about scotch tape and nylon and rayon and synthetic rubber and guided missiles and hydrofoil ships and skin diving and earth satellites and space rockets and electric typewriters and

electronic computers and electric shavers and, yes, even electric can-openers and electric erasers. Just try to find them!

On my commencement day in 1922 none of those things had been heard of.

Those inquiring minds have done well. They have lengthened life, shrunk the earth, expanded the known universe. They have opened the door to a tomorrow full of knowledge as yet undreamed of.

President McVey said we needed inquiring minds.

And that was good, for 1922.

But, again, that is not enough for 1963.

For inspite of - or perhaps because of - the wonders accomplished by the inquiring minds, never was the world in greater trouble, never was the world in greater danger.

We no longer superstitiously fear the elements, dread space, tremble at the unknown. The world has gone far beyond all that.

Yet today the world and all its civilization stands on the brink of extinction... by suicide!

1963 needs something more than the knowing and inquiring minds which have produced these wonders.

1963 needs discriminating minds, minds capable of distinguishing between good and evil, between truth and propaganda, minds capable of seeing through the maze of scientific knowledge and achievement to the true heart of the matter to the betterment of mankind.

Today we live in a push-button world, a world where everything can be answered by a mathematical formula, by the push of a button.

I suppose you remember the story, probably apocryphal, of Mrs. Albert Einstein on a tour of the National Museum. She saw a great complex of apparatus, and asked its purpose. The guide proudly told her that it was a device for determining the weight of the world. To which Mrs. Einstein replied, "H-m-m. Albert does it on the back of an old envelope."

How much does the world weigh? Apply a mathematical formula.

How long will the sun continue to shine? Push some buttons.

How close to Venus will a space racket be at a given second? Push a button.

How does an airplane fly, how can sound ride upon a ray of light, how does man split an atom, and what happens when he does? Push some buttons.

How strong is a piece of steel, how long is a second of time, how deep is the ocean, how high is the sky? Push a button.

How can man destroy the world?

You know the answer. Ten thousand unmanned missiles of incredible destruction rest today in their underground silos on both sides of the Iron Curtain, aimed with precision at the heartlands of the world, awaiting only that fateful finger on that fateful button to destroy the world and all that is in it.

These wonders have been brought about by great minds, minds possessed of vast knowledge multiplied by inquiry and curiosity, until we have reached the point where we think the machine can solve every problem.

We are acquiring push-button minds.

Instead of thought we accept canned opinion, ready-mix culture, fresh-frozen human emotion.

For whom should we vote for high public office?

Push a button, and get your answer from Batton, Barton, Darakin and Osborne.

Should I vote for an Eisenhower or a Stevenson? Push a button, and Madison Avenue will produce two images - an "I like Ike" or a Stevenson with a hole in his shoe.

Should I vote for a Kennedy or a Nixon? I push a button and I take my choice between a Jacqueline and a Pat, which is the most charming and gracious?

What should be the answer to any great problem? Push a button, and Walter Lippman, or Marquis Childs, or Drew Pearson Arthur Krock, or Westbrook Pegler will do your thinking for you.

Should I favor the Republican or the Democratic approach to national and world-wide problems? Push a button, and get your answer from ZZa ZZa Gabor or Elvis Presley or Frank Sinatra or Ronald Reagen.

Is there a Communist base within 90 miles of Florida with thousands of foreign troops and weapons poised to spread the doctrines and destruction of Marx and Engels and Lenin throughout the Americas, and what should we do about it? Push a button and

ask Jack Paar.

A whole vast industry works unceasingly to create images, frequently bearing no resemblance to the real thing, and if the image is more attractive than the real thing, we choose the image. That's the easy, the push-button way.

We have become as accustomed to the easy way that we overlook the fact that there is an end to the things we can accomplish with mathematics, with chemistry, with science, with technology, with push-buttons.

How can we control the fury of the atom, now that science has unleashed its power? There's no slide-rule solution.

How can the conflict between democracy and communism be resolved? The push-button phrases like "I'd rather be dead than Red" or "I'd rather be Red than dead" won't do it.

How can the budget be balanced against the overwhelming requirements of foreign aid and domestic progress?

Put away your computers.

How can we keep filth from our newsstands and not interfere with the freedom of speech and the press?

There's no push-button to help you.

How can we settle a strike that keeps newspapers from the streets of our greatest cities for months; or keeps the ships of the ocean locked in their berths?

No slide-rule will help us.

How can we strike a balance between government regulation and individual liberty and initiative?

How can we, without bloodshed, accord equality and dignity to the negro after two hundred years of thought-conditioning, and finally live up to the precepts of the Constitution's preamble?

How can we make democracy really work, how can people be taught to abandon the cult of personality, accept the Madison Avenue slogans and images for what they are, and elect their leaders upon the basis of true worth?

Throw away your slide-rules, your formulae, your electronic computers.

If these and similar problems are to be solved - and solved they must be, if we are to survive - it will be by minds equipped with basic knowledge, yes, fortified by insatiable curiosity, yes, but more than that.

It will be by discriminating minds, by minds capable of distinguishing right from wrong, good from evil, moral from immoral, truth from propaganda.

It will be by minds capable of seeing through the cloud of slogans and cliches and images to the shining truth beyond.

Our development of discriminating minds of this nature lags two hundred years behind the development of scientific minds.

Yet our only salvation, our only hope to save ourselves from our own push-buttons, lies in the development of minds capable of brushing aside the taboos of prejudice and ignorance and superstition, minds and hearts big enough to pull down the images which Madison avenue has created, minds brave enough to look at the naked truth, and not flinch from the hard, unending task of determining,

without push-buttons, without gimmicks, without slogans, without worn-out, tired cliches, without sophistry, which way lies the truth.

Recently Raymond Kohey suggested, in quite another context, that we must learn to "see that the king is naked, that the man-made image is really an image, that the political figure may be a charlatan, that the issues of which the politicians prate are not issues at all in the broad constituency of the nation, and that the remedies proposed are nostrums compounded in quackery."

Today, in 1963, the graduating classes of all the schools go forth into a world with such tremendous advances in science and technology, and burdened with such unanswerable problems, as were never dreamed of in my year of 1922.

That you will proceed with scientific and technological developments with accelerated speed is assured, for the door to the new world of science so far has been opened but the smallest crack.

Yes, you will go forward.

But for how long?

That is for you and your generation to answer. You have in your hands the weapons for suicide.

You will answer whether we shall destroy ourselves, or move into a bright new world, where man and men may live together in peace and harmony; where truth, and love and justice will prevail, and the dignity of man - the universal dignity of man - will be an accomplished reality.

I am confident that forty years from now, you and the thousands of your fellows being graduated this year and the next, will have produced advances in philosophy, in ethics, in political science, in international law, in morality, in jurisprudence, in human understanding, to catch up with and keep pace with the scientific progress which was the peculiar contribution of my generation.

I am confident that in your future scientific progress and human understanding will work hand in hand to bring about a golden age in the history of man.

It's all right for me to be confident.

It's fine for me to hope.

But whether that confidence will prove to have been justified, whether those hopes will be fulfilled, you and your generation will furnish the answer.

Good luck, and may God bless you every one!