

Yale Class of '68  
May 31, 2003

At my age it's a pleasure to be anywhere, but I'm especially pleased to be with the class of '68 so many of whose members I knew, admired and liked immensely.

By way of explanation: Nearly four years ago when I had a stroke, I tried to console myself with Mark Twain's observation about Wagner's music: "It's better than it sounds". However, I have no illusion about the sounds of my own voice, so please be indulgent.

When you graduated in 1968, the questions you asked yourselves were not as crucial as those the world asked of you. That's even truer today. The world is not for shirkers. It begs us to scorn the cowardice that dares not face new truth, the laziness content with half-truths, and the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth. It calls for true patriots, those who love their country enough to address its flaws.

I want to talk to you of heart-felt things, as I tried to do during the Vietnam War when you graduated and I was your chaplain. Today, 35 years later, you're looking at an old man in a hurry!

"Like love, war always finds a way." So said Berthold Brecht some 25 centuries after Plato wrote, "Only the dead have seen an end to war". Historian Will Durant estimated that in all of recorded history only 29 years could be described as free of war. And the century just passed set records for bloodletting.

One of the worst things about any war is that truth is generally its first casualty. Violence needs lies to defend itself just as lies for their protection turn to violence. While certainly it was moving to watch Iraqis celebrate their long-awaited and much deserved liberation, "Operation Iraqi Freedom" hardly describes the purposes of our invasion. Were freedom's defense a goal of American policy, why, years ago, just off our shores, were we not crying bloody murder at Battista before his overthrow by Castro, at Trujillo, at "Papa Doc" in Haiti and at Samozza before his overthrow by the Sandinistas? Every nation makes decisions based on self-interest and then defends them in the name of morality. In private, at least, Franklin Roosevelt was candid. Asked why we were in cahoots with a dictator as evil

as Samoza, he replied with a wicked grin, "Because he's our dictator."

In the 1980s Saddam was our dictator. In his war against Iran we financed, equipped and armed him and, I think it fair to say, if figs were Iraq's chief export then no GI would be stationed there today.

So why did we invade Iraq, despite the work of the UN inspectors, despite the Pope, the National Council of Churches, city councils in the US, the Security Council at the UN, and virtually all of world opinion? Don't forget that the largest one-day protest in history took place February 15 when in 600 cities on five continents 10 million people marched against the threatened invasion of Iraq.

The answer to our invasion is spelled out in published papers such as the "Project for a New American Century" (note the title) written in 1997, the "National Security Strategy" released in September of last year; also in Robert Kagan's rather eloquent book Of Paradise and Power.

The reasoning in these documents is as follows: the United States has just entered a long era of American hegemony. We are, and intend to remain, the dominant strategic force in both Europe and East Asia. Beyond that, we are prepared to stake out interests in Central Asia, in places that most Americans never before knew existed. Because we are so powerful we are ready to deal with such danger points as those represented in Bush's "axis of evil". If other countries wish to join us, fine, but we are prepared to go it alone. If for others preemptive, or more accurately "preventative" wars are blatantly illegal, so be it; but they are OK by us, part of the National Security Strategy.

By contrast, - the reasoning goes on - Europe is militarily weak. The days of Napoleon and Bismark are long over. Today European countries are busy sharing sovereignty and their economies. In their military weakness it is natural that they should favor law over force; that they should see in place of "rogue states" "failed states"; that they should look askance at America's unilateralism and favorably on the UN because the Security Council is a substitute for the power they lack. So, in Kagan's paraphrase, Europe is from Venus, and the United States is from Mars. And let the world rejoice and be exceeding glad.

In 1821 John Quincy Adams said: "the United States goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy". In doing so, he warned, we "might become the dictatress of the world....but no longer be the ruler of our own spirit".

But what is the class of '68, the class that graduated during the Vietnam war, to make of this fresh militancy? Does our newly rediscovered evangelical nationalism reflect the "better angels" of America's nature?

I am reminded of Ezekial's lament over proud Tyre: "Your heart was proud because of your beauty. You corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor."

As a Christian, I am struck by "And the Devil took him up to a high place, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to him, 'To you I will give all this authority and their glory; for it has been delivered to me.' "

It was the Devil who tempted Jesus with unparalleled power and wealth, and I believe it is the Devil in each American that makes us love to feel powerful.

All of us want Al Qaeda stopped. But there's a choice: by the law of force or by the force of law, international law, which means multinational coalition building, sharing intelligence, freezing assets, even by forceful extradition of terrorists, if internationally sanctioned, and by trials not in Guantamo Bay but before an international court such as the International Criminal Court which almost alone we refuse to recognize.

Further, while World War II was won by economic power, the war against terrorism will be won only by economic justice. Terrorism is no metaphysical phenomenon. It springs from specific historical causes - political oppression, economic exploitation - and until these evils are faced and American complicity in their furtherance is seen for what it is, our continued counter-violence will recruit more and more terrorists. We could stem the tide of terrorism, increase our national security, not by a \$400 billion military budget but by using a lot of that money to wage war against global poverty.

It breaks my heart that we have squandered the global sympathy that was ours after 9/11 - "Nous sommes tous Américains" headlined Le Monde; and also that we have squandered a near record surplus as we head for a new record deficit. Who now is to pay for all these wars and their aftermaths if not the poor and particularly their children who already are being met by closed doors at Head Start programs and at community branch libraries, and by ever longer lines at health clinics? In Oregon they are cutting school days and closing schools in Los Angeles and New York. But we know for sure that in Crawford, Texas, the ranch will not be up for sale; that Halliburton that earlier gave Vice President Cheney over 30 million dollars in severance pay has now received, with no competition, a multi-year contract for work in Iraq worth many billions of dollars; and that, according to the IRS, tax shelters in the Cayman Islands and Bermuda save American businesses \$75 billion a year, the Administration's first estimate of the cost of the Iraqi war. American hegemony in the world has its counterpart here at home in the hegemony of the rich and powerful.

The war in Iraq doesn't spell the beginning of the end, only the end of a beginning. As the President said, "Just one victory in a war on terror....[which] still goes on". Who's next? When finally Iraqis rule Iraq they will be our Iraqis. We are there for oil all right, but oil less for fuel than for power. We want our corporate hands on the spigots of Middle East oil. That way we'll enormously influence the economies of the world from Argentina to Japan. I am reminded of the Athenian spokesman who said as Athens prepared to invade a smaller neighbor: "The strong do what they will, and the weak suffer what they must."

Finally, I want briefly to address the question, "What are we going to do about North Korea and other unfriendly countries intent on owning their own nuclear weapons?"

For decades the United States and other nuclear powers have been practising nuclear apartheid. Despite binding agreements to do otherwise, a handful of nations have arrogated to themselves the right to build, deploy and threaten to use nuclear weapons while policing the rest of the world against their production. The fact that India and Pakistan successfully obtained these weapons was totally predictable as nuclear apartheid has no more chance of succeeding in the world than did racial apartheid in South Africa.

Nuclear weapons cry out for a single standard: either universal permission or universal prohibition. But if it's permission and nuclear war comes, all humanity will be downwind. That is why Kofi Annan repeatedly says, "Global nuclear disarmament must remain at the top of the UN agenda".

Shouldn't nuclear disarmament also be at the top of the agenda of every temple, mosque and church? To people of faith, God alone has the authority to end all life on earth. All we human beings have is the power. Further to entrust the use of such destructive power to political leaders, all of whom are fallible and some malicious, is reckless beyond belief.

Clearly it will not be tomorrow or the next day that our government will be persuaded to accept a time-bound framework in which all nuclear weapons will be abolished under stringent international inspection. But if today we Americans start thinking about it; if with a quickened sense of conscience we begin to speak out, join with others around the world in writing, lobbying and demonstrating, then slowly, surely the promise of a nuclear-free world will defeat the peril of nuclear war.

We are blessed to live in a democracy. In a democracy dissent is not disloyal: what is unpatriotic is subservience to policies that appear wrong headed. To quote Abraham Lincoln: "To sin by silence when they should protest makes cowards of men and women". In a fractured and dangerous world, apathy is morally unacceptable. The sobering, demanding question is not "why abolish nuclear weapons?" but rather "why not?"

When thinking of peace through perpetual war, it's well to remember Thomas Mann: "War is a coward's escape from the problems of peace." Certainly peace requires more courage than war, especially when patriotic platitudes stir the blood and narrow the mind constricting the heart. And, God knows, humility is far nobler than pride.

As regards the abolition of nuclear weapons, let me close with other words of Lincoln, this time to the Congress in December of 1862. They address the abolition of slavery but they are words no less pertinent to nuclear abolition: "The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise

with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must dis-enthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country" - and let us add, "the world".

Peace always seems a weary way off. Lamented Jeremiah: "We looked for peace, but no peace came." But if we give up on peace we give up on God. And remember, dear class of '68, there never was a night or a problem that could defeat sunrise or hope.

William Sloane Coffin