

## **“The South and the Nation”**

Commencement address given by Lenoir Chambers '14

Kenan Stadium

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No son of this university comes back to it in the long years of his post-graduate life without remembering the moment of completion that is the possession of these men and women who receive their degrees here tonight.

To them I offer my congratulations and, if I may, the congratulations and pride of this throng of family and friends; and I remind them of that immensely larger throng of family and friends and teachers who, at many unforgotten moments, have given them stimulus, courage, determination, and affection.

To these graduates of all degrees I make one plea.

This is your university in a sense in which it is tonight no one else's. Into your hands, as new members of the multitudes of those who sustain it, its destiny is being placed. You will live with it longer than any other group among its present graduates. You will have a responsibility to preserve, strengthen, and guide it that no other group now has.

Give it the opportunity to do its work. Arm it to rise to the highest role of an old state university in a swiftly changing world in which-not paradoxically-it finds itself at home.

Guard its freedom. Strengthen its integrity. Join its dedication to responsibility. Intensify its concept of personal honor. Add your courage to its courage. Increase its devotion to the common good. Fortify it against political pressures. Enlarge its hospitality to ideas. Deepen its scholarship. Heighten its regard for excellence. Stimulate its creative spirit. Never let it forget its duty to teach. Help it to lift its eyes up to the galaxies and to peer down into the molecules. Enrich its humanity. Lead it, follow it, be a part of it, in search for truth.

As you do, you will yourselves live and grow as university men and women taking your places in a great - though, I must say, often perplexing - world. Thus you will justify the concept of university education which you exemplify tonight.

Because you are university men and women, and are surrounded by friends of this institution, I ask you to think for a few minutes tonight about the land where this university lives - the land *in* which it was conceived and born, *from* which it draws strength, *for* which it marches on its mission.

This is the South, and all of you have special knowledge of the South because you are North Carolinians, or because you live in other Southern States, or because from Chapel Hill you have known Southern life. But this is also the United States of America, and people of the South are people of the United States. Southerners are Americans.

No other part of the United States has had such a distinctive history and has stood for such a recognizable kind of sectionalism. No other American region finds itself today, after great changes, in such uncertainty as it contemplates its relation - and is itself contemplated in its relation - to the remainder of America.

No other part of the United States has so engaged the historians, has so fascinated the sociologists, and has so perplexed both the people who live within it and the people who live outside it.

Wherever you go, wherever you live, you will never escape the influence of the South. Even if it were not a part of you it would still exercise its influence on you. For it does so on all Americans in a sense in which no other region of the country does. That is why the relation of the Southern states to the United States, and the relation of the United States to the Southern states, create a major condition of American life.

I do not say these things because this is the first year of the centennial of the American Civil War, although the influence of that struggle, and of all that is has left behind, is visible all around us today. We did not need the anniversary to tell us how much the great American tragedy is our inheritance. It is reflected every day in our customs, habits, associations, organizations, and emotions, our manner of outward living and the shape of our inward thinking. A hundred years later we have neither escaped the Civil War nor entirely outgrown it. But the relation of the South to the nation ranges further and embraces more.

Nor do I speak of the relation of the South to the nation, and of the nation to the South, merely because of the contemporary debate over aspects of racial desegregation. This is serious, difficult, and important business. But it is a manifestation of something larger. It is not a cause of, although it is a symptom of, the relation of the South to the nation.

When we look at this relationship we must look first at some of the major forces in the history of the South – in the life of the South as a region. They include, as you know, innumerable aspects of life when two races live side by side: the adaptation to this condition of life by the controlling white people in the South long before the American Civil War; the efforts to justify slavery and to conjure up “positive good” in “the peculiar institution”; the debate in logic and emotion with the abolitionists; the concentration on the politics of defense; the war itself and its immense effects on Southern life – defeat, occupation, forms of secondary citizenship for people long accustomed to place and power, and for decades thereafter acceptance of economic inferiority.

The record of the region includes many myths of Southern life, running back to colonial days, concentration heavily on plantation life, and coming forward into modern times with judicial and anthropological theories. The myths were all invented and nurtured to justify the life, to bolster the assumptions, of the region, and to sustain those who lived this life and postulated these assumptions in their efforts to make the living more tolerable and to give it outward dignity.

The long political struggles of the latter 19<sup>th</sup> Century and of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century revolved almost invariably around Southern themes that were unlike those in other parts of the United States.

The inevitable effect of all such forces was to drive Southern life inward and to isolate Southern thinking from the thinking of the remainder of the American people. More recently, the rise of the Negro race into a broader consciousness of its American citizenship, and the growing struggle of Negroes to obtain recognition of their rights and to enlarge their opportunities, have added fresh pressures to the more than a hundred years of pressures that have pushed Southern life back upon itself.

Yet as I remind you of such inheritances of Southern life you can hardly be blamed for thinking that they are unsatisfactory for the modern world. In the world in which we live today, in which all these graduates here tonight will live in their future, it is more important that other forces are pulling – often have already pulled – Southern life and Southern thinking outward from the eddies in which they have often whirled around and around and around. The modern world has pulled the South nearer the main currents of American life.

Time, education, communication, economic growth, business, the tides of population, war, international responsibilities, the scholarship and objectivity of historians, the curiosity and the clear eyes of young writers of the South – all these in cumulative effect amount to a quiet revolution, and not always a quiet one.

Thus recorders of Southern history can tick off one by one the gradual disappearance – as C. Vann Woodward, the historian, counted in one listing – of the one-horse farmer, one-crop agriculture, one-party politics, the sharecroppers, the poll tax, the white primary, the Jim Crow car, the lynching bee. Agrarianism and segregation he noted as gone or going the way of slavery. The cavalier legend of origin, the plantation legend of antebellum grace and elegance, the Reconstruction as sufficient explanation for decades of Southern life, have all been curtailed by moderns.

There is hardly an area of Southern life, old style, as portrayed in the legends and traditions and assumptions, that has not felt the correcting hand of continuing examination. Such a volume as *The Southern as American*, published by the press of this university a few months ago, edited by Charles Grier Sellers, Jr., and showing at many points the scholarship of this university, is a notable contribution by young historians to the new enlightenment and understanding.

In the spread and deepening of this Southern revolution no one doubts this mellowing influence of time or the growing power of education. No one assumes that the young men and women who pour out of the colleges and universities year by year – Negroes as well as whites, we should keep in mind – accept without question the assumptions of their fathers and grandfathers and great-grandfathers. They are asking their own questions, searching for their own understanding, and reaching their own conclusions. Those who are troubled by the process would be wise as Margaret Fuller was advised to do, to accept the universe. This is the irresistible way of the future.

When communication is universal, and in some forms instantaneous, almost everywhere, who can live in a sanctuary of inheritance, or of his own making, without living in a medieval world?

When economic developments lift Southern cities faster than those of other parts of the country, and the rural regions glow with the pride of their cultivated fields and the shining colors not only of their houses but of their living, how can those who live here separate themselves in their thinking, any more than in their financial and commercial relationships, from a nation and a people that economically are one?

When business thinks and acts with no regard whatever for state borders, or regional boundaries, or sectional divisions, or old historical theories and conflicts, but in the national sense – and if not in the national sense, then at least as far as organizational reach can extend – who in such circumstances, can build a wall around his life?

When population swings from the rural regions to the cities, and from the cities to the suburbs; when the young go everywhere in blithe disregard of everything except

interest and opportunity; when the black people stream northward and westward into the great cities; when industrial development and distributional growth bring engineers and managers and skilled workers, and those who can teach skill, into old and bereft agricultural lands – in such a time, who measure progress by the rivets in grandfather's neck?

When war unites the nation, and the young stride forth, does anyone think of Mason and Dixon's Line?

And when the turn of the world and our own American capacities and resources, lift this nation to global power and responsibility, who measures leadership in terms of ancient section arguments? Ask the Georgia boy, educated at Davidson College, who is now the American Secretary of State.

The details of these changes the historians of the South which we all know in some degree, and often puzzle over, the writers of the Southern states – especially the young writers – have caught in vivid and revealing portraits, often done in compassion, nearly always done in honesty. If they do not always tell a pretty tale, the life they write about is sometimes not pretty at all. They seem to know both instinctively and by education what some men in public life in the South never learn even after bitter lessons.

Do such changes as these mean, then, that we are marching toward the end of Southern distinctiveness? Is the South as a region done for? Is something uniquely vivid fading into dull-brown standardization?

I think not. For the time will never come when the South does not have something of its own to contribute to the greater community of which it is inescapably a part. Woodward asked on a notable occasion: "Is there nothing about the South that is immune from the disintegrating effect of nationalism and the pressure for conformity? Is there not something that has not changed?"

He could think of only one thing. That was the South's library.

But that quiet judgment is itself profound. For the South – I am quoting for Woodward now – "had learned what it was to be faced with economic, social, and political problems that refused to yield to the ingenuity, patience, and intelligence that a people could bring to bear upon them. It had learned to accommodate itself to conditions that it swore it would never accept, and it had learned the taste left in the mouth by the swallowing of one's own words. It had learned to live for long decades in quite un-American poverty, and it had learned the equally un-American lesson of submission. For the South had undergone an experience that it could share with no other part of America – though it is shared by nearly all the people of Europe and Asia – the experience of military defeat, occupation, and reconstruction.

In an America that is struggling today to understand the world in which it must accept heavy responsibility, this is no mean gift for the South to present to the nation as endowment. Power and organization and wealth and capacity the nation possesses. But the United States must yet prove that it possesses in sufficient degree full comprehension and understanding of a world bursting with new nations, new ideas, new energies, new hopes, new threats, and a long line of new uncertainties and dangers. They all emerge from peoples that have been intimately acquainted with grief such as most of the United States has never known.

The contribution of the South includes, of course, far more than a history of frustration and hardship. It includes courage under pressure. It includes gaiety and

humor. It includes extraordinary loyalty, not only to a Lost Cause, but to an ideal of national duty in the face of international danger, as the record of the people of the South during four wars in fifty-two years unmistakably attests. It includes a historic capacity to endure and survive.

When William Faulkner, a man of the deepest Deep South, accepted the Nobel Prize for literature, he spoke briefly – as you will remember – about the end of man, and he did so in the words of nobility.

“I decline,” he said, “to accept the end of man. . . .” “I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance . . .”

The poet’s privilege, the writer’s privilege, Faulkner continued, is “to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past . . .”

Whatever else they are, these words are a conviction reached in the land in which a man of the South lived.

Finally, to go no further in a much longer list, the contribution of the South in its modern history – and I say it with pride and a good hope for the future – includes its young people. Give them the opportunity, and they will rise to achievement. Open the doors, and they will lead the way. Let them see the truth, and they will make it prevail.

To free the young is to free the whole South. That is not only the unfinished business of the South: it is the stark and overwhelming necessity of the South. For there are respects in which the South must change if it is to take its true place in American life. It must change if it is to rise from the remnants of restrictive regionalism to normal nationalism. It must change if it is to assume a larger role of responsibility in the leadership and guidance of the United States of America. The South can never prove readiness for responsibility so long as it lives content within the confines of sectionalism. It can no more afford a philosophy of spiritual isolationism within the United States than the United States can afford a policy of isolationism in today’s world. The Southern states cannot peer out at the nation through the loopholes of a Fortress South any more than the United States can retreat into a Fortress America and seek safety there.

There are no such fortresses in modern life. There is only the life that encompasses all: for the South, the whole national life; for the nation, the whole international life. We must play our part in both.

We must do so, in the South, by accepting the duties, obligations, and standards of American life.

We can never be satisfied to create the most distinguished university “in the South” – I am speaking in general terms now and not in relation to any one university – when the Dean of the Graduate School of this university was forced to say a few months ago that “no Southern university can realistically be ranked among the top twenty universities in the United States.” (I suspect the same thing would have to be said of libraries, museums, and symphony orchestras.)

(Governor Sanford, I am happy to note, has made these realities a primary concern of his administration. His principle – that “we must do more than merely make education universal . . . we must give our children the quality which they need . . . they

must be prepared to compete with the best in the nation” – is a fundamental necessity of the South.)

(And a former governor of Virginia, Colgate W. Darden, Jr., spoke to the same point, in Chapel Hill a few weeks ago, when he said of higher education in the south that “it is nonsense to say that we are going to project a plan for making regional or sectional standards in South – you are either a good institution or not, no matter what the geography.”)

We can never be satisfied with public leadership based on any kind of regionalism that rests below the best of the nation’s standards. The South has problems that do not exist in like degree in other parts of the country – of course. But they do not justify surrender to their difficulties as the way of the future. The problems of the South are far too important to entrust the leadership in their solution only to men who do not relish rightful opportunity and superior achievement, or are content with less, and are unwilling to go all out for both.

We can never be satisfied with political practices based on theories of exploiting the purely nuisance values of the South as a section in place of taking our part in the full sweep of national politics. We cannot play the game when we are winning and pull out of the game when we are outvoted. We cannot be indifferent to the restriction of the ballot for some reasons that are plainly at variance with the national constitutional system to which, in other situations, we appeal. We cannot argue Calhoun in the age of Kennedy – or Eisenhower – without causing intelligent Americans in three-quarters of the nation to wonder what kind of people Southerners are. We cannot live from 1896 to 1954 under the philosophy of one judicial ruling on the Federal Constitution and then characterize from 1954 onward another judicial ruling in the same area of American rights as jurisdictionally out of bounds.

We cannot be satisfied with anyone’s resorting to violence as a form of regional resistance to national thinking or national elections. Nor can any Southern state encourage the fist, the bludgeon, or the mob as an instrumentality of thought, argument, or action. The South must prove that it lives by law before it can convince the nation and the world of its capacity to contribute effectively to an American leadership that rests on the law.

We can never be satisfied with any manifestation of the cult of the second-best. Rising from the lower levels to the top is always difficult, for a man, a state, a region, a people, when the economic barriers are high. But the unforgivable sin is acceptance of the philosophy of inferiority under the pretense that it is something else or because of unawareness of its true nature. The start is knowing the facts and being dissatisfied with them. The mark of distinction is the first step toward correction.

The South cannot take its necessary steps without the active influence of Southerners who see and understand but think it is unnecessary for them to make their influence felt. They are wrong. We cannot leave the upward struggle in the hands of any leadership that is short of our best. In the long and hard climb to make the most of itself, to rise from the narrow aspects of sectionalism to the broader aspects of a healthy nationalism, the South cannot afford to lose any of its human assets. It has problems that require all possible statesmanship, all possible character, all possible wisdom and intelligence.

These we must mobilize. For the South must free itself from all crippling alliances of its past that lessen its spiritual power in the land. It must put its house in order so that it can take its ancient and rightful place in American life. It must release the energies of all its people. It must rediscover its true destiny.

In this high quest where better can we look for spiritual leadership than to such a university as this one of which we here tonight are a part?

It has shown many times, and in many ways, knowledge of the South, understanding of the South, and participation in the life of the South.

It has striven to take its place in the full stream of American life, fighting against odds to keep up with the best and knowing that that is what it must do. It is dedicated to unlimited learning.

It is located strategically near the border of the South, historically as well as geographically, and it is close to the remainder of the nation. It has the respect of both.

It can interpret the South to the nation, and the nation to the South.

It does not lack for courage, and it is not afraid of leadership.

I hope it will continue, I hope it will increase, the work of its scholarship and the influence of its understanding – and its own realization of the deep necessity – in lifting the South into full and complete and proud participation in the life of the nation.