A funny thing happened to me on my way to the University. I ran into a transportation problem – a traffic tie-up on the freeway! I was 15 minutes late to my press conference. Maybe that's why the Secretary of Transportation was invited here. I came – and brought some announcements and might add some solutions which I'll describe in more detail in a few moments.

I feel privileged to share this 1970 commencement with you here at USC. You who are graduating may rightfully be proud of your accomplishments. And those distinguished educators with whom I share this platform deserve recognition for what they have done to advance this University – especially during the last decade.

Your university has been developing so rapidly that one might say the students and the institution were maturing together – each making impressive contributions to the other. Surely a good university must be a place where traditions are constantly enriched by the dynamics of change.

If there was ever a time when the university could be a cloister, that time has long gone. Look at the pace of events at USC in the immediate past: A massive increase in facilities, a vast rise in fulltime faculty and students, a great emphasis on excellence and scholarship, and finally, the ultimate recognition of being elected to membership in the AAU – the Association of American Universities.

I think the experience of watching a great university take shape is an object lesson for young people today. It proves that the search for excellence is a never-ending one – for institutions as for individuals. And the rigors of that search should make us humble, patient, and determined. In our surging idealism we should not forget that neither a good university nor a good society is created overnight.

Both take time. Sometimes too much time.

A society built upon democratic ideals must change with the times if it is to survive.

There are those, of course, who believe in revolution for its own sake. They quote Thomas Jefferson out of context and call for the overthrow of our institutions by violence. But they don't seem to realize that force always generates a reaction, and sometimes the reaction is worse than the original cause of grievance.

No organized society really enjoys a challenge to the status quo – and it is extremely difficult for society to adjust rapidly when the challenge comes from someone they perhaps haven't been listening to.

Don't get me wrong. I am not apologizing for those of your elders who watch TV and shake their heads in dismay. Rather, I am trying to help you understand why your elders have often reacted the way they have. If there is any lack of communication between the generations today, I think a large part of the problem—as Dr. Topping suggested—is that the young and the old have gotten out of the habit of talking with each other. In too many cases neither wants to hear what the
other has to say, and each is too inclined to judge by reputation instead of by realities.

Such a judgment is as unjust to those of us already in positions of leadership as it is to you who are assuming leadership.

Such injustices must be corrected if a better day is to come.

I say this, because I sense a turning point in what I guess you could call “national town and gown relationships.”

I think we are coming to a better day in our national life, and that young men and women such as yourselves will lead the way. You are beyond doubt members of the best educated generation in history. You have, or will shortly have, resources that are the envy of the world. You are sophisticated and adventurous in ways our generation could never dream of. And you have proved by your presence here today that you know how to stick with a task until it’s done.

As part of the most educated generation in history, you have spent a major part of your time until now training your minds. You have disciplined yourselves through hard work and study to think, to evaluate, and to judge. However, as part of a generation very aware of your responsibilities, you have repeatedly demanded that your academic studies be relevant. Cardinal Newman—whose idea of a university is still the most alive and relevant to today's world—argued that a university education must do one thing well: it must teach students how to think, how to master their minds that they might master their lives. It is this mental discipline you have developed while in school which makes you eminently qualified to master the discipline of life. Life is a series of disciplines—no matter what you choose to do in life, it is your ability to think and to understand which will be most important.

However, the ability to think entails the responsibility to act. Harvey Cox reminds us: “Not to decide is to decide.”

When you refuse to choose, when you ignore a moral decision, you have chosen not to decide. And this is perhaps the most irrevocable decision of all. The choice between absolute good and absolute evil is a simple one but it exists only in fables. Real choice is never a simple decision between good and evil. Real choice is the agony of choosing between two complex values, each composed of good and evil. And real choice inevitably leads to action. To choose and not to act is not to choose. However, to choose and to act is to risk making a mistake.

If you do not act because you are afraid to make mistakes—if you do not dare to risk failure—you choose failure.

The choices which face you may seem very small. They may not affect the destiny of nations, but each of them will determine your own destiny.

It would be presumptuous and foolish for me or for any of us to tell you what these choices must be.

The world has changed very much since I sat where you are sitting. The answers I had then are not the answers I have now.

In the past few weeks, I have met a number of your fellow students who have chosen to come to Washington to work on the Hill and in the various executive departments because they wish to change national policy. I admire these young people. For they have discovered that the best way to change the system is to work to turn it around. So I urge you to become politically active—not using slogans which die with the morning paper, but working, voting, supporting the political candidate of your choice, and running for office yourselves.
You will have no lack of opportunity to put yourselves on the line. We still have not achieved racial and class equality in this country though the foundations of equality have been laid. We have not found a way to get all parts of our society to pull together for common goals. We still assault our landscape with inadequate planning, we poison the air and water, we waste our mineral resources, and we have allowed our cities to become centers of crisis by following the philosophy that “bigger” in some way equates with “better.”

And—as I am sure you are aware—these problems must be tackled by your generation. To be blunt, you're the only young generation we've got. And if you really want to make something of your lives, you will reach for solutions rather than attack the history of the problems.

Your generation has the stuff to do it. The problems that in former years were called insoluble, you call intolerable.

The technical gains made in the recent past—nuclear power, computers, sophisticated microcircuitry, lasers, the list goes on and on—are being given to you to apply to the problems of social justice, urban organization, and a decent environment for all.

Some of the more skeptical among you may be saying to yourselves: “Just give me one good, recent example of progress in any of those trouble zones you mentioned. Give me a reason for hope.”

Well, there are so many, in fact, that it would be impossible to do more than skim over the top in my brief remarks here today. But take a look at what we have been doing in the Department of Transportation alone.

We are mobilizing massive efforts to get air pollution and noise under control. We have financed demonstrations of new kinds of bus engines which not only generate much cleaner exhausts, but are also a lot quieter.

We are working closely with a number of universities and industry to reduce and, hopefully, eliminate pollution caused by automobiles. With the cooperation of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare we are developing tougher standards to cut exhaust emissions drastically.

We have already cut noise and pollution from the jet engine. We are doing additional research to cut it still further. And I might note that a considerable portion of that research is being done here at USC's School of Engineering under a half-million dollar grant announced in January.

At our urging, the petroleum companies are getting the lead out of their gasolines. We are well on our way toward control of the kinds of smog produced by the internal combustion engine and are also striving to develop alternative engines.

And these actions are only the beginning. The Environmental Quality Act of 1970—which was the first bill signed by the President this year—will produce similar results on a broad front for cleaner water, solid trash disposal, and long-range land management. I am delighted to have announced at a Press Conference earlier today that we have made a grant of 5.5 million dollars to the Southern California Rapid Transit District here in Los Angeles for the purchase of 200 new buses. It is significant that each of them will have injector systems sufficient to meet advanced pollution control standards. This is an example of the action we are taking to turn the tide against dangerous pollutants and make our cities healthy, pleasant places to live in.

However, conventional systems can only be the starting point in building the safe, efficient, high-speed, urban transportation we need today. So just two hours ago I also announced that initial steps have been taken by the City of Los Angeles, the State of California, and the Department of Transportation to produce the world's first commercial tracked air cushion vehicle system right here in Los Angeles.
The “TAC-VEE,” as it is called, will run on elevated concrete guideways at speeds up to 150 miles-per-hour from the airport along the San Diego Freeway to the San Fernando Valley. The TACV is not only fast, but it will be powered by electric linear induction motors that are pollution free and virtually noiseless. There will be one intermediate station at Wilshire Boulevard next to the (pardon the expression) UCLA campus, and the Sepulveda Dam Recreation Area. Airline passengers will be ticketed and their baggage checked at the TACV stations. They won't have to give their baggage another thought until they arrive at their final destination in New York, Paris, Rome, or wherever...

I don't mind going out on a limb to say that the TACV is the most promising new development in the entire field of ground transportation and environmental control. Completion is scheduled for late 1972.

There isn't any major transportation problem in this country that can't be solved by the application of such new concepts, and I include short take-off aircraft, the highspeed demonstration trains like the Metroliner and Turbotrain that run between Boston, New York City, and Washington, and even such advanced systems that will operate over long distances completely underground. (No pollution, no noise, no landtakings.)

I see no technical limit to the possibilities of devising means of transportation that are fast, pollution-free, make little or no noise, and are as safe as we can make them.

We can do it, and I am confident that many of you in this audience today will help us do it.

You have the intellectual power and sense of personal responsibility. Much has been given you, and you will now return the gift of knowledge with interest. Mere affluence will never be enough for your generation.

Now there's nothing wrong with prosperity. The material things in this world can provide a foundation for social justice and perhaps even moral progress. But material things can only be a start toward the good life.

Your generation knows that, as Bob Dylan put it, those who are not busy being born are busy dying.

You must be re-born every day by examining the meaning and direction of your lives.

A great many people throughout history have never had the opportunity to examine the meaning of life or to commit themselves to anything more noble than the struggle for their daily bread. You will get this chance. But don't cop out. Yours is a generation that has the opportunity—indeed, has already initiated action—to re-dedicate our national heritage to a higher way of life.

As you have studied for these seemingly long years, you must now re-dedicate your intellectual curiosity and your academic skills to the creation of a better quality of life.

If there is one thing certain it is that a university degree is really a license to further learning. In today's rapidly changing society the man or woman who fails to continue learning is committing moral, intellectual, and economic suicide.

When a colleague asked Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes why he was studying Greek at the age of 94, Holmes replied: “My dear fellow, it's now or never.”

And that's about it. Now or never. Most of you, as graduates of one of the best universities in this country, have already made such a commitment.
You will be intellectual and moral activists in the best sense of that word; open to innovation, tolerant of dissent, suspicious of conventional pieties, tough, resilient, generous in victory, and unflinching in defeat.

And, I might add, I am certain that the course of your lives will demonstrate in every act, a respect for the sacredness of the law, for due process, for reason and enlightened fair play and social justice. You will respect the great spiritual truths which guard us from savagery and mere pleasure seeking. I believe you will increasingly respect the sacrifices of your parents as you yourselves take on the job of raising families. You will draw strength from the divine power that created us.

Truly your horizons are infinite. As a generation destined to move the earth, I salute you.