

*The Importance of History*

*Ken Burns*

*Stanford Commencement Address*

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President Hennessy, members of the Board of Trustees, distinguished faculty and staff, proud and relieved parents, calm and serene grandparents, distracted but secretly pleased siblings, ladies and gentlemen, graduating students of the Class of 2016, good morning. I am deeply honored and privileged that you have asked me here to say a few words at so momentous an occasion, that you might find what I have to say worthy of your attention on so important a day, especially one with such historical significance. One hundred and twenty-five years. Wow.

Thank you, too, for that generous introduction, President Hennessy. I always feel compelled, though, to inoculate myself against such praise by remembering that I have on my refrigerator at home an old and now faded cartoon, which shows two men standing in hell, the flames licking up around them. One guy says to the other, “Apparently my over 200 screen credits didn’t mean a damn thing.” They don’t, of course; there is much more meaning in your accomplishments, which we memorialize today.

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I am in the business of memorializing – of history. It is not always a popular subject on college campuses today, particularly when, at times, it may seem to some an anachronistic and irrelevant pursuit, particularly with the ferocious urgency this moment seems to exert on us. It is my job, however, to remind people – with story, memory, anecdote and feeling – of the power our past also exerts, to help us better understand what’s going on now. It is my job to try to discern patterns and themes from history to enable us to interpret our dizzying, and sometimes dismaying, present. For nearly 40 years now, I have diligently practiced and rigorously maintained a conscious neutrality in my work, avoiding the advocacy of many of my colleagues, trying to speak to all of my fellow citizens.

Over those decades of historical documentary filmmak-

ing, I have also come to the realization that history is not a fixed thing, a collection of precise dates, facts and events that add up to a quantifiable, certain, confidently known truth. History is a mysterious and malleable thing, constantly changing, not just as new information emerges, but as our own interests, emotions and inclinations change. Each generation rediscovers and reexamines that part of its past that gives its present new meaning, new possibility and new power. The question becomes for us now – for you especially – what will we choose as our inspiration? Which distant events and long dead figures will provide us with the greatest help, the most coherent context and the wisdom to go forward?

This is in part an existential question. None of us gets out of here alive. An exception will not be made in your case and you'll live forever. You can't actually design your life. (If you want to make God laugh, the saying goes, tell her your plans.) The hard times and vicissitudes of life will ultimately visit everyone. You will also come to realize that you are less defined by the good things that happen to you, your moments of happiness and apparent control, than you are by those misfortunes and unexpected challenges that, in fact, shape you more definitively, and help to solidify your true character – the measure of any human value. You, especially, know that the conversation that comes out of tragedy and injustice needs to be

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encouraged, emphasis on courage. It is through those conversations that we make progress.

A mentor of mine, the journalist Tom Brokaw, recently said to me, “What we learn is more important than what we set out to do.” It’s tough out there, but so beautiful, too. And history – memory – can prepare you.

I have a searing memory of the summer of 1962, when I was almost 9, joining our family dinner on a hot, sweltering day in a tract house in a development in Newark, Delaware, and seeing my mother crying. She had just learned, and my brother and I had just been told, that she would be dead of cancer within six months. But that’s not what was causing her tears. Our inadequate health insurance had practically bankrupted us, and our neighbors – equally struggling working people – had taken up a collection and presented my parents with six crisp \$20 bills – \$120 in total – enough to keep us solvent for more than a month. In that moment, I understood something about community and courage, about constant struggle and little victories. That hot June evening was a victory. And I have spent my entire professional life trying to resurrect small moments within the larger sweep of American history, trying to find our better angels in the

most difficult of circumstances, trying to wake the dead, to hear their stories.

But how do we keep that realization of our own inevitable mortality from paralyzing us with fear? And how do we also keep our usual denial of this fact from depriving our lives and our actions of real meaning, of real purpose? This is our great human challenge, your challenge. This is where history can help. The past often offers an illuminating and clear-headed perspective from which to observe and reconcile the passions of the present moment, just when they threaten to overwhelm us. The history we know, the stories we tell ourselves, relieve that existential anxiety, allow us to live beyond our fleeting lifespans, and permit us to value and love and distinguish what is important. And the practice of history, both personal and professional, becomes a kind of conscience for us.

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As a filmmaker, as a historian, as an American, I have



been drawn continually to the life and example and words of Abraham Lincoln. He seems to get us better than we get ourselves. One hundred and fifty-eight years ago, in mid-June of 1858, Abraham Lincoln, running in what would be a failed bid for the United States Senate, at a time of bitter partisanship in our national politics, almost entirely over the issue of slavery, spoke to the Republican State Convention in the Illinois Statehouse in Springfield. His political party was brand new, born barely four years before with one single purpose in mind: to end the intolerable hypocrisy of chattel slavery that still existed in a country promoting certain unalienable rights to itself and the world.

He said, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.”

Four and half years later, he was president, presiding over a country in the midst of the worst crisis in American history, our Civil War, giving his Annual Message to Congress, what we now call the State of the Union. The state of the Union was not good. His house was divided. But he also saw the larger picture. “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 disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country.”

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And then he went on: “Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history. ... The fiery trial through which we pass will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation. We say we are for Union. The world will not forget that we say this. We know how to save the Union. ... In giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom to the free – honorable alike in what we give, and what we preserve. We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best hope of earth.”

You are the latest generation he was metaphorically speaking about, and you are, whether you are yet aware of it or not, charged with saving our Union. The stakes are slightly different than the ones Lincoln faced – there is not yet armed rebellion – but they are just as high. And before you go out and try to live and shape the rest of your life, you are required now to rise, as Lincoln implored us, with the occasion.

You know, it is terribly fashionable these days to criticize the United States government, the institution Lincoln was trying to save, to blame it for all the ills known to humankind, and, my goodness, ladies and gentlemen, it has made more than its fair share of catastrophic mistakes. But you would be hard pressed to find – in all of

human history – a greater force for good. From our Declaration of Independence to our Constitution and Bill of Rights; from Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, Fifteenth and Nineteenth Amendments to the Land Grant College and Homestead Acts; from the transcontinental railroad and our national parks to child labor laws, Social Security and the National Labor Relations Act; from the GI Bill and the interstate highway system to putting a man on the moon and the Affordable Care Act, the United States government has been the author of many of the best aspects of our public and personal lives. But if you tune in to politics, if you listen to the rhetoric of this election cycle, you are made painfully aware that everything is going to hell in a handbasket and the chief culprit is our evil government.

Part of the reason this kind of criticism sticks is because we live in an age of social media where we are constantly assured that we are all independent free agents. But that free agency is essentially unconnected to real community, divorced from civic engagement, duped into believing in our own lonely primacy by a sophisticated media culture that requires you – no, desperately needs you – to live in an all-consuming disposable present, wearing the right blue jeans, driving the right car, carrying the right handbag, eating at all the right places, blissfully unaware of

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the historical tides that have brought us to this moment, blissfully uninterested in where those tides might take us.

Our spurious sovereignty is reinforced and perpetually underscored to our obvious and great comfort, but this kind of existence actually ingrains in us a stultifying sameness that rewards conformity (not courage), ignorance and anti-intellectualism (not critical thinking). This wouldn't be so bad if we were just wasting our own lives, but this year our political future depends on it. And there comes a time when I – and you – can no longer remain neutral, silent. We must speak up – and speak out.

“We must remain committed to the kindness and community that are the hallmarks of civilization.”

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For 216 years, our elections, though bitterly contested, have featured the philosophies and character of candidates who were clearly qualified. That is not the case this year. One is glaringly not qualified. So before you do anything with your well-earned degree, you must do everything you can to defeat the retrograde forces that have invaded our democratic process, divided our house, to fight against, no matter your political persuasion, the dictatorial tendencies of the candidate with zero experi-

ence in the much maligned but subtle art of governance; who is against lots of things, but doesn't seem to be for anything, offering only bombastic and contradictory promises, and terrifying Orwellian statements; a person who easily lies, creating an environment where the truth doesn't seem to matter; who has never demonstrated any interest in anyone or anything but himself and his own enrichment; who insults veterans, threatens a free press, mocks the handicapped, denigrates women, immigrants and all Muslims; a man who took more than a day to remember to disavow a supporter who advocates white supremacy and the Ku Klux Klan; an infantile, bullying man who, depending on his mood, is willing to discard old and established alliances, treaties and long-standing relationships. I feel genuine sorrow for the understandably scared and – they feel – powerless people who have flocked to his campaign in the mistaken belief that – as often happens on TV – a wand can be waved and every complicated problem can be solved with the simplest of solutions. They can't. It is a political Ponzi scheme. And asking this man to assume the highest office in the land would be like asking a newly minted car driver to fly a 747.

As a student of history, I recognize this type. He emerges everywhere and in all eras. We see nurtured in his campaign an incipient proto-fascism, a nativist anti-immi-

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grant Know Nothing-ism, a disrespect for the judiciary, the prospect of women losing authority over their own bodies, African Americans again asked to go to the back of the line, voter suppression gleefully promoted, jingoistic saber rattling, a total lack of historical awareness, a political paranoia that, predictably, points fingers, always making the other wrong. These are all virulent strains that have at times infected us in the past. But they now loom in front of us again – all happening at once. We know from our history books that these are the diseases of ancient and now fallen empires. The sense of commonwealth, of shared sacrifice, of trust, so much a part of American life, is eroding fast, spurred along and amplified by an amoral Internet that permits a lie to circle the globe three times before the truth can get started.

We no longer have the luxury of neutrality or “balance,” or even of bemused disdain. Many of our media institutions have largely failed to expose this charlatan, torn between a nagging responsibility to good journalism and the big ratings a media circus always delivers. In fact, they have given him the abundant airtime he so desperately craves, so much so that it has actually worn down our natural human revulsion to this kind of behavior. Hey, he’s rich; he must be doing something right. He is not. Edward R. Murrow would have exposed this naked emperor months ago. He is an insult to our history. Do

not be deceived by his momentary “good behavior.” It is only a spoiled, misbehaving child hoping somehow to still have dessert.

And do not think that the tragedy in Orlando underscores his points. It does not. We must “disenthrall ourselves,” as Abraham Lincoln said, from the culture of violence and guns. And then “we shall save our country.”

This is not a liberal or conservative issue, a red state, blue state divide. This is an American issue. Many honorable people, including the last two Republican presidents, members of the party of Abraham Lincoln, have declined to support him. And I implore those “Vichy Republicans” who have endorsed him to please, please reconsider. We must remain committed to the kindness and community that are the hallmarks of civilization and reject the troubling, unfiltered Tourette’s of his tribalism.

The next few months of your “commencement,” that is to say, your future, will be critical to the survival of our Republic. “The occasion is piled high with difficulty.” Let us pledge here today that we will not let this happen to the exquisite, yet deeply flawed, land we all love and cherish – and hope to leave intact to our posterity. Let us “nobly save,” not “meanly lose, the last best hope of earth.”

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Let me speak directly to the graduating class. Watch out. Here comes the advice.

Look. I am the father of four daughters. If someone tells you they've been sexually assaulted, take it effing seriously. And listen to them! Maybe, some day, we will make the survivor's eloquent statement as important as Dr. King's Letter from a Birmingham Jail.

Try not to make the other wrong, as I just did with that "presumptive" nominee. Be for something.

Be curious, not cool. Feed your soul, too. Every day.

Remember, insecurity makes liars of us all. Not just presidential candidates.

Don't confuse success with excellence. The poet Robert Penn Warren once told me that "careerism is death."

Do not descend too deeply into specialism either. Educate all of your parts. You will be healthier.

Free yourselves from the limitations of the binary world. It is just a tool. A means, not an end.

Seek out – and have – mentors. Listen to them. The late theatrical director Tyrone Guthrie once said, "We are



looking for ideas large enough to be afraid of again.” Embrace those new ideas. Bite off more than you can chew.

Travel. Do not get stuck in one place. Visit our national parks. Their sheer majesty may remind you of your own “atomic insignificance,” as one observer noted, but in the inscrutable ways of Nature, you will feel larger, inspired, just as the egotist in our midst is diminished by his or her self-regard.

Insist on heroes. And be one.

Read. The book is still the greatest manmade machine of all – not the car, not the TV, not the smartphone.

Make babies. One of the greatest things that will happen to you is that you will have to worry – I mean really worry – about someone other than yourself. It is liberating and exhilarating. I promise. Ask your parents.

Do not lose your enthusiasm. In its Greek etymology, the word enthusiasm means simply, “God in us.”

Serve your country. Insist that we fight the right wars. Convince your government, as Lincoln knew, that the real threat always and still comes from within this favored land. Governments always forget that.

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Insist that we support science and the arts, especially the arts. They have nothing to do with the actual defense of our country – they just make our country worth defending.

Believe, as Arthur Miller told me in an interview for my very first film on the Brooklyn Bridge, “believe, that maybe you too could add something that would last and be beautiful.”

And vote. You indelibly underscore your citizenship – and our connection with each other – when you do.

Good luck. And Godspeed.



