

WESTERN RESERVE UNIVERSITY

IN MEMORY OF

JOHN F. KENNEDY

Address by Dean C. H. Cramer at the University Convocation

Amasa Stone Chapel
26 November 1963

The Angel of Death has been abroad in the land; we have heard, with horror and sorrow, the beating of his wings.

Even in this gray November we can observe clearly that

Death aims with fouler spite
At fairer marks.

(Francis Quarles)

Madmen have killed before; Presidents have been struck down at critical moments:

There was the patient Great Emancipator, killed at the moment when he might have healed the wounds of long strife.

There was the only President born in Cuyahoga County, in the shadow of whose tomb we find ourselves today.

There was another Ohioan, buried in nearby Canton, shot down while graciously receiving visitors in a reception line.

Now there is the youngest of elected Presidents, killed like Lincoln on a Black Friday----dead by violence at the moment when all of his efforts were devoted to restraining those who wanted to be more violent in the midst of the cold war overseas, and to the restraining of those who wanted to be more violent in the racial war at home.

We sorrow, but we do not succumb to black despair.

There is the injunction

Remember now his steadfastness. In him
Was a perfection, an unconscious grace,
Life could not mar, and death cannot efface.

(Robert Hillyer)

We remember the words of Winston Churchill:

Death and sorrow will be the companions of our journey;
hardship our garment; constancy and valor our only
shield. We must be united, we must be undaunted,...

We recall the words of Lincoln:

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan----to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations.

We cherish the words of the martyred Garfield, delivered at the time of the death of Lincoln:

For mere vengeance I would do nothing. This nation is too great to look for mere revenge. But for the security of the future I would do everything.

And there are the words of President Kennedy----as he proclaimed the Thanksgiving which we will observe but not celebrate:

As our power has grown, so has our peril. Today we give our thanks, most of all, for the ideals of honor and faith we inherit from our forefathers----for the decency of purpose, steadfastness of resolve and strength of will, for the courage and humility,----which they possessed and which we must seek every day to emulate.

John F. Kennedy had courage----and he had faith.

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His own life was a profile in courage, similar to that of men he admired so much

Courage has been described as "grace under pressure".

President Kennedy was unfailingly courteous----the man who, as an experienced journalist reported, charmed with a warm smile----and shook a hand sincerely, not looking over the shoulder to see who else was around.

He was pragmatic----and grew fond of quoting Lord Morley's dictum:

Politics is one long second-best, where the choice often lies between two blunders.

But along with this grace and pragmatism went his magnificent fortitude. He admired it in others: He found it in John Quincy Adams during the Embargo crisis. He found it in Sam Houston who could say, when he voted against the Kansas-Nebraska Act: "I can forget that I am called a traitor". He found it in the Old Roman from Nebraska,

George W. Norris, who said: "I would rather go down to my political grave with a clear conscience than ride in the chariot of victory". He found it in a Robert Taft, who insisted on "the liberty of an individual to think his own thoughts".

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President Kennedy proved his own courage in the Solomons during World War II, and he confirmed it in his Presidency. It was in his Inaugural Address that he said:

So let us begin anew----remembering on both sides that civility is not a sign of weakness and that sincerity is not always subject to proof.

Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate.

He answered the rhetorical question as to what he could do for his country----by giving the last full measure of devotion.

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He had faith----a word that, for too many, may have become old-fashioned and meaningless. President Kennedy had profound faith in democracy and in the nation.

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He had a pragmatic faith in democracy.

I say a pragmatic faith----because he was aware of the faults of democracy----and would quote the ironic statement that

Democracy is the worst form of government----except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.

(Winston Churchill)

But for President Kennedy democracy was positive, and he would say that it meant much more than popular government and majority rule, that a democracy that had no monument of individual conscience in a sea of popular rule was not worthy to bear the name.

He had faith in the nation----as against sectional and regional interests----and he would quote with approbation the statement of a one-time citizen of his State----made in the famous Seventh of March Speech in support of the Compromise of 1850. Daniel Webster had then said:

Mr. President: I wish to speak today, not as a Massachusetts man, nor as a Northern man, but as an American....I speak today for the preservation of the Union. Hear me for my cause.

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In our current difficulties the indictment extends beyond the assassin.

It extends to something in the nation itself----to a strain of madness and violence which tries to justify uncontrolled individual action, or mob rule----to a strain of madness and violence which is destructive of the principles of law and order and democracy.

The irony of the President's death is that his short administration was devoted almost entirely to attempts to curb this very streak of violence in the American character.

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In a very real sense whatever happens to the President happens in lesser degree to each of us. Any man's death diminishes us, because we are involved in mankind.

We must look into our own hearts----for courage and for faith.

We must ponder, since all individuals are occasionally fallible, whether it is advisable to allow any person to possess engines of destruction----worth ten dollars by mail order, and firing lethal bullets valued at ten cents----instruments which can kill the wise and the fair.

We must ponder, since all nations are occasionally fallible, whether it is advisable to permit them to possess nuclear engines of destruction----which can destroy the earth.

We must examine our own hearts, and determine whether we have faith in a democratic nation with equal rights for those of differing race and religion and politics----and whether we have the courage to support them in those rights.

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If we do, we can sorrow in this grievous hour----and we can also take hope that President Kennedy has not died in vain.

If we admire his courage and faith, we will find solace in the well-known words:

Death be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful----for thou art not so.

For those whom thou think'st thou doest overthrow,
Die not

(John Donne)