

At Their Most Enlightened and Alert

JEFFREY R. HOLLAND

Welcome back to school. As Sister Holland has said, we love you and miss you when you are away, and we are praying for you to have a bright and beautiful year together. Work hard. Learn much. Make your opportunities count. And *do* come in on time at night, but *don't* come by our house to tell us.

Another Election Year

This first semester of our brand-new academic year, it should be duly noted, is going to be spiced up by a national presidential election. It is now the first week of September, the conventions are over, and we have nine weeks to the day to go. And we know only two things for certain: first, that as Reinhold Niebuhr once said, “Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary” (*The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, 1944). Democracy is indeed, in that sense, still “on trial.” The civic loyalty and involvement of our people is its fundamental appeal and its only protection. Take your responsibilities seriously, document and discuss the issues, and cast your vote if you are of age. (And almost all of you are.) Democracy only works if you do. That’s the first thing we need to know in an election year. The second thing we know is that

the humorists are going to have a heyday, and indeed already are.

Americans love to joke about their public figures. Thomas E. Dewey is said to have been the first presidential casualty of a political joke when, in the campaigning of 1948, some comedian said he looked like he had just fallen off a wedding cake. Now you are all too young to have even seen pictures of Governor Dewey, but with his impeccable dark suits and pencil-thin mustache, that is exactly how he looked—and people laughed. President John F. Kennedy may not have laughed, however, when Bob Hope kept snickering about his youth. Mr. Hope said they had served milk at Kennedy’s first cabinet meeting, but it hadn’t turned out well because they spent the next half hour just burping each other.

Comedians are especially tough on politicians who move from unknown to nationally famous in just an instant, like Senator Dan Quayle, for example. Now, regardless of your personal political persuasion, you have to admit that Senator Quayle has been the object

Jeffrey R. Holland was president of Brigham Young University when this devotional talk was given on 6 September 1988.

of plenty of “fowl” jokes. Mark Russell said he didn’t know whether the ticket of “Bush and Quayle” was the title of a hunting magazine or the name of an English pub. Nevertheless, Republicans are insisting that this ticket is the nation’s best possible insurance against turning back the clock to those bitter days of the sixties when this country was torn apart over the war in Indiana. It was absolutely terrible, says Russell—the bombing of Indianapolis, the mining of harbors along the Ohio River, crawling through those jungles just outside Gary and South Bend. But Jay Leno has defended Senator Quayle’s military service devoutly. He said National Guardsmen are necessary, even though all they can do is “sit around waiting for something to happen. If that isn’t training for the vice presidency, I don’t know what is.”

Military service aside, many feel that Senator Quayle has distinct advantages over his Democratic counterpart, Senator Lloyd Bentsen. Someone said that at least two things Quayle has that Bentsen doesn’t have are a hair blower and a discernible pulse. Governor Dukakis’ advisers wanted him to pick a running mate who was less exciting than himself, one not likely to overshadow him. Inside sources say it came down to either Senator Bentsen or Orville Redenbacher.

As for the presidential candidates themselves, the comedians are not a whit more reverential. To them Bush is a wimp and Dukakis a shrimp, with neither of them threatening Webster’s or Calhoun’s reputations for oratory. Mark Russell said he didn’t think there was enough caffeine in the whole world to keep us awake through these nine weeks. (I don’t know where that leaves us at BYU.)

Johnny Carson may have rendered the unkindest cut of all when he said that Governor Dukakis was so confident he had already ordered Phone Book One to sit on in the Oval Office. Carson quickly noted, however, that Dukakis had reason to be confident because one of Vice-President Bush’s recent

stem-winding addresses, a police officer and the district attorney came up, drew a chalk outline around him, and said no one could approach the podium until they had identified the next of kin.

“He Built for Eternity”

Well, enough of this nonsense. There really is method in my madness this morning. In addition to the very important matter of a presidential election year—and it is a very important matter, all joking aside—BYU is also saluting in something of a final way the bicentennial anniversary of the U.S. Constitution, the document William Gladstone once described as “the most wonderful work ever struck off at a given time by the brain and purpose of man” (“Kin Beyond Sea,” *North American Review* 127 [September/October 1878], p. 185). In fact, BYU is this very moment in the midst of producing a feature-length film on the Constitutional Convention that will premiere on 30 April 1989, the bicentennial anniversary of George Washington’s inauguration as the first and, arguably, the greatest of this republic’s forty presidents.

Surely when the Lord speaks in section 101 of the Doctrine and Covenants of raising up “wise men” for the founding of this nation and the establishment of constitutional government, he must have been speaking first and foremost of George Washington. As unassuming as he was, Washington’s impact on the new republic and on the framing of its government was greater than that of any other living man. His prestige as the victorious colonial general was immense, and his character, his very presence, inspired confidence.

Note this language used by a journalist of the day to describe Washington’s arrival for that first inauguration. It is unclear whether the writer is describing royalty or deity.

It is impossible to do justice . . . to . . . the Scene exhibited on his Excellency’s approach to the city.

Innumerable multitudes thronged the shores, the wharves, and the shipping—waiting with . . . anticipation his arrival. . . .

This great occasion arrested the publick attention beyond all powers of description. . . . All ranks and professions expressed their feelings, in loud acclamations, and with rapture hailed the arrival of the FATHER OF HIS COUNTRY. . . .

The scene . . . was . . . beyond any descriptive powers of the pen to do justice to—How universal . . . the sentiments of respect and veneration!—All ranks [exclaimed,] “WELL, HE DESERVES IT ALL!”

The spontaneous [expressions] of gratitude . . . are the highest reward that virtue enjoys, . . .

*Many persons . . . were heard to say, that they should now die contented—nothing being wanted to complete their happiness . . . but the sight of the Saviour of [their new nation]. [From the Connecticut Courant of 4 May 1789, in Everett Carl Ladd, *The American Polity* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1987), pp. 72–73]*

That was written two hundred years ago. Two hundred years later the adulation is still nearly the same in both tone and content. Listen to this from a resolution passed by Congress and read by the president of the United States on the two-hundredth anniversary of Washington’s birth:

Washington has come to personify the American Republic. He presided over the convention that framed our Constitution. The weight of his great name was the deciding factor in securing its adoption by the States. These results could never have been secured had it not been recognized that he would be the first President. When we realize what it meant to take¹³ distracted colonies, impoverished, envious, and hostile, and weld them into an orderly federation under the authority of a central government, we can form some estimate of the influence of this great man. . . .

We have seen many soldiers who have left behind them little but the memory of their conflicts;

but . . . the power to establish among a great people a form of self-government which the test of experience has shown will endure was bestowed upon Washington, and Washington alone. . . . His was the directing spirit without which there would have been no independence, no Union, no Constitution, and no Republic. His ways were the ways of truth. He built for eternity. His influence grows. His stature increases with the increasing years. In wisdom of action, in purity of character, he stands alone. We can not yet estimate him. We can only indicate our reverence for him and thank the Divine Providence which sent him to serve and inspire his fellow men. [Handbook of the George Washington Appreciation Course for Teachers and Students (Washington, D.C.: U.S. George Washington Bicentennial Commission, 1932), pp. vii–viii]

To co-opt a line from James Madison regarding those crucial times, George Washington “decide[d] forever the fate of Republican government” (Ladd, *The American Polity*, p.73).

I have gone to some length this morning to pay tribute to Washington for at least two reasons. The first is because he is a genuine hero, and I have always wanted to make some public expression about the truly remarkable man I believe he was. I think we may never fully appreciate the magnitude of his impact upon those neonatal days of this nation when it could have so easily died aborning.

The second reason is to draw all of this closer to home, to see what lessons Washington and his age have for us here at the start of another school year at BYU. To make that transition I quote a recent BYU visitor, political pundit and journalistic gadfly Garry Willis. Said he:

[In an election year] we get the presidents we deserve. A great people is what you need for a great president. Washington was the greatest president, because the people were at their most enlightened and alert. [America] right now is

escapist. *It wants to be soothed, and told it doesn't have to pay or sacrifice or learn.* [“Things That Matter,” *Vis a Vis*, July 1988, p. 70; emphasis added]

Now our jokes about candidates and campaigns leave a bit of a taste in our mouths. Can that possibly be true, that the *people* made Washington great? That *they*, as well as he, were “at their most enlightened and alert”? What does that mean for a university, especially for Brigham Young University? I know it means there must be no concession to escapism here, that we must not be “soothed” regarding sacrifice and learning. This university was born out of pioneer effort and anguish. We have a century-long tradition here of asking very much of those who come, and we are asking more and more every year. We intend to be a great people here. We intend to be one of the great universities of the world, a unique university whose light casts a very special gospel glow. But to do that, to become that, will require the commitment and loyalty of *every one of us*. As Ben Franklin said at the fateful signing of the declaration that started it all, “We must all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately” (to John Hancock, on signing the Declaration of Independence, 4 July 1776). This is still true, two hundred and twelve years and two months and two days later in Provo, Utah.

Knowledge Wedded to Virtue

Study diligently this year. You owe it to both your prophetic and political ancestors. The inestimable Thomas Jefferson said, “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free . . . , it expects what never was and never will be” (letter to Colonel Charles Yancey, 6 January 1816). That sounds very much like something revealed through our own Joseph Smith—that men and women cannot be saved in ignorance, and indeed, that they can be saved no

faster than they gain knowledge (D&C 131:6; *Teachings*, p. 217).

The Prophet Joseph Smith, who shortly before his untimely death had determined to run for the office of president of the United States, said to all of us at BYU;

Thy mind, O man! If thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the darkest abyss, and the broad expanse of eternity. . . .

. . . Your minds will expand wider and wider, until you can circumscribe the earth and the heavens, . . . and contemplate the mighty acts of Jehovah in all their variety and glory. [*Teachings*, pp. 137, 163]

This university is one of the “mighty acts of Jehovah,” so far as I am concerned, and we need to pledge to it our devout and loyal citizenship. “Just say no” to some pleasures and some distractions. Be a little more serious about the responsibilities you have here. Stretch your minds, study, and pray. Learn what great people must always learn. Seek wisdom out of the best books. Seek it “by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118). Have appropriate fun at a great time in your life, but do not wish to be soothed in the rigor of a superior education. If we are to be all God wants us to be, we must be “at our most enlightened and alert.”

Brigham Young, who did not run for president of the United States but for a brief moment did run *from* one, said,

All the knowledge, wisdom, power, and glory that have been bestowed upon the nations of the earth, from the days of Adam till now, must be gathered home to Zion. [JD 8:279]

Put forth your ability to learn as fast as you can, and gather all the strength of mind and principle of faith you possibly can. [JD 8:146]

Learn everything that the children of men know. [JD 16:77]

Take pains and pride to . . . rear [y]our children so that the learning and education of the world may be theirs. [JD 12:326]

Whether building countries or wilderness cabins, whether crossing the Delaware or the American desert, the Founding Fathers of this nation and the prophets of the Restoration knew that *ignorance was the enemy*, literally and profoundly a tool of the adversary. “The glory of God is intelligence, or, in other words, light and truth. Light and truth forsake that evil one” (D&C 93:36–37). “If men would be great in goodness, they must be intelligent” (Brigham Young, Manuscript History of the Church, manuscript in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Archives, Salt Lake City, 22 September 1851, vol. 21, p. 88). “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, it expects what never was and never will be.”

Of course, from the earliest beginnings of Western civilization, it has always been understood that knowledge had to be wedded to virtue, that mere information untempered by qualities of justice and mercy and duty and compassion could leave one simply a sophisticated barbarian in the end.

“Live Appropriately”

Perhaps the greatest essayist ever to put pen to paper wrote, “To *compose our character* is our duty, not to compose books, and to win, not battles and provinces, but *order and tranquility* in our conduct. Our great and glorious masterpiece is to live appropriately” (Donald M. Frame, trans., *The Complete Essays of Montaigne* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958], pp. 850–51; emphasis added).

That is true whether one speaks of founding a republic or pursuing a university degree. So is this from the brilliant Edmund Burke:

Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains on their own appetites. . . . Society cannot exist unless a

controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere; and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things, that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters. [The Works of the Right Honorable Edmund Burke, vol. 4 (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1889), pp. 51-52; emphasis added]

That was said, for all intents and purposes, at the very hour this nation was being born, but it sounds like something someone would say today at BYU. Who would speak that way? Joseph Smith? Or Brigham Young? Or Karl G. Maeser? Or Ezra Taft Benson? Or your freshman English teacher? *All* of them would say it. Ignorant, intemperate minds and behavior are the enemies to all true possibility—social, intellectual, and theological. On the other hand, educated, disciplined, virtuous lives are the mark and hope of true godliness, true strength, and freedom—in this life and forever.

We want you to feel a genuine sense of freedom at BYU, but that can only come with an appreciation for the moral expectations and academic standards we have cultivated here for more than one hundred years. You are absolutely free—perfectly free—Founding Father and George Washington free to embrace the vision of this university established by apostles and prophets, and agreed upon by this community in common consent. We plead with you to seize fully and luxuriate in that opportunity. At BYU you are free to become more than you can become at any other university in the world—but then you know, of course, that I am very biased. “To *compose our character* is our duty . . . and to win, not battles and provinces, but *order and tranquility* in our conduct. Our great and glorious masterpiece is to live appropriately.”

Such public and personal virtue was understood by the Founding Fathers to be the *precondition* for republican government, the

base upon which the structure of all government would be built. Such personal ideals as John Adams’ “virtuous citizen” and Thomas Jefferson’s “moral sense” and “aristocracy of talent and virtue” were fundamental. Even the pessimistic James Madison said,

*I go on this great republican principle, that the people will have virtue and intelligence to select men of virtue and wisdom. Is there no virtue among us? If there be not, we are in a wretched situation. No theoretical checks, no form of government, can render us secure. To suppose that any form of government will secure liberty or happiness without any virtue in the people, is a chimerical idea. [20 June 1788, in *The Debates in the Several State Conventions on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution*, arr. Jonathan Elliot, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1901), pp. 536–37]*

To Be Honorable

We have a code of honor at BYU, and I invite you to join with us this year in discussing and enhancing it. I especially invite you to join with your BYUSA officers in reviewing this code, examining its tradition and meaning, and reexamining its premises and its promises. If as a university community it is possible, as some already helping us consider, to write a yet better expression of what it means to be honorable here, we will do so.

Inasmuch as this is your code, and it is the broad basis upon which we form a moral community at BYU, it is important for you to understand it and come to feel a sense of personal ownership for it. It means much more than keeping your hair trimmed and well groomed, and more than dressing modestly and cleanly, though we expect that of every one of you. Surely all can understand why shorts and miniskirts and sloppy clothing and bizarre hair fashions are inappropriate at BYU. We want a clean, modest, dignified appear-

ance because we stand for something here. We are *not* a high school and we are not just *any* university. At BYU, disciplined appearance represents an external aspect of a much more important and sacred inner discipline. Perhaps good grooming and modest, clean clothing are for BYU what some religions speak of as symbolic sacraments—“an outward sign of an inward grace.” And that “inward grace” ought to be dealing with what Jesus called “the weightier matters of the law.” These include honesty and chastity and integrity and service—the consequential issues of the Honor Code.

Be honest in class and out. Be women and men of integrity with your teachers, your roommates, your bishops, and yourselves. Don’t cheat on an exam or steal a bicycle or backpack and then stand in slack-jawed wonder when a high-ranking government official commits espionage or a wealthy businessman goes to jail for embezzlement.

*How true is that our destinies are decided by nothings and that a small imprudence helped by some insignificant accident, as an acorn is fertilized by a drop of rain, may raise the trees on which perhaps we and others shall be crucified. [Henri Frederic Amiel, *Journal*, 9 April 1856, tr. Mrs. Humphry Ward]*

Be clean in thought and word and deed. I told you last winter how strongly I feel about the symbols and sacraments of human intimacy. That intimacy is not yours to violate, and you do so at your peril. It will never matter at BYU if we have immaculate buildings and manicured grounds and clean clothing and well-groomed hair if in our inner selves we are, as Christ once said to the hypocritical, “like unto whited sepulchers, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones, and . . . uncleanness” (Matthew 23:27).

Steven Blake's Sacrifice

I started with George Bush and Michael Dukakis and went on to George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. That is all pretty heady company for us here in Utah County. Let me end on a more local note, with one brand of BYU citizenship much closer at hand. I tell you this story for its virtue, not for sensationalism or sentimentality.

Last Tuesday, just one week ago this very hour, Steven Eugene Blake was buried, a twenty-one-year-old sophomore, son of faculty member and friends Reed and Katie Dean Blake. Steven was a BYU student majoring in just about everything, one who believed in learning and virtue and sacrifice. He interrupted his university experience to serve a mission, as so many of you will do or have done, and he served with devotion and faith and immense enthusiasm.

Two months to the day after returning from his mission, as Steven was preparing to reenter BYU, he witnessed a terrible accident at 225 West 2230 north in Provo, Utah. Two employees of a local company were erecting a large metal sign near that street. Unfortunately, the mechanical boom they were operating from their service truck came in contact with the mega-sized 7200-volt power line that runs along 2230 North. When that current flashed down the boom to the truck, the employee working near it was immediately knocked unconscious, falling onto the electrified ground wire and onto other perhaps now highly charged metals that were nearby. The other employee, who had been operating the boom and had barely jumped to safety, called for medical assistance and then tried to free his colleague from the current.

Driving by this scene was Mr. Enthusiasm himself—big, handsome, fun-loving Steven Blake, BYU student, returned missionary, citizen. A wrestler and football player in high school, Steven, knowing that a human life was at stake, but perhaps not realizing that life

would be his own, stopped his car and joined that employee in trying to muscle his colleague away from contact with the penetrating voltage. In doing so, both men were immediately knocked unconscious, the employee falling away from the truck but Steven falling forward onto the wire and highly charged soil near the rear of the truck. His body immediately began to convulse from the relentless electrical pulse surging through him.

Another valiant Samaritan happening by, Dave Conley of Salt Lake City, then tried to rescue Steven, but was immediately knocked back. He fell unconscious, free from the electrical field.

Emergency medical personnel soon arrived but were unable to free Steven from the current until after the power had finally been shut off. For some seventeen minutes Steven Blake—BYU student, returned missionary, citizen—lay with 7200 volts pounding through his muscular frame.

I sat in the Edgemont Fifth Ward Chapel one week ago this very moment and thought of Steven and thought of you and thought of the beginning of new school terms for us and for him.

"A great people is what you need for a great university," to paraphrase Mr. Wills. "Not those who wish to escape, or be soothed, but a people willing to pay and sacrifice and learn." Steven Blake's sacrifice seems an immense one this morning as I look at you and look at his family who are here with us. We could speak of what one should and should not do when a lethal current is exposed and in force. But that is not my purpose. My purpose today is only to pay tribute to "virtuous citizenship": "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13).

I tell this story this morning for its Christian significance on a campus where we pledge and profess Christian belief. I submit to you that our effort this year must be perhaps different

in degree but not in kind from the effort that a ragged bunch of irregulars made during a winter at Valley Forge, that a beleaguered band of pioneer outcasts made in these valleys for the privilege of freedom and worship and growth, and that Steven Blake made on behalf of seventy-year-old Johnny Wakamatsu. I submit to you that your devotion to your educational opportunity and the life of service that must follow it is to be different in degree but not in kind from that gift given by the Son of God himself, made for friend and foe alike—none of whom could possibly have comprehended the full meaning and majesty of the privilege he was providing them. In this academic year of

presidential elections and bicentennial celebrations, I salute you, the students of Brigham Young University who have chosen to educate your minds, discipline your appetites, and serve, indeed sacrifice for your fellow men and women.

God bless you for being the generation you are, “fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners” (D&C 109:73). God bless you for wanting to be at your “most enlightened and alert,” for preparing to live as “a great and glorious masterpiece.” I pray for every blessing upon you this year as you strive to fill that full measure of your creation, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.