Yesterday evening I returned from the army at Potidaea, and having been a good while away, I thought that I would go and look at my old haunts. So I went into the palaestra of Tauereas, which is over against the temple adjoining the porch of the king Archon, and there I found a number of persons, most of whom I knew, but not all. My visit was unexpected, and no sooner did they see me entering than they saluted me from afar on all sides; and Chaerophon, who is a kind of madman, started up and ran to me, seizing my hand, and saying, How did you escape, Socrates?—(I should explain that an engagement had taken place at Potidaea not long before we came away, the news of which had only just reached Athens.)

You see, I replied, that here I am.

There was a report, he said, that the engagement was very severe, and that many of our acquaintance had fallen.

That, I replied, was not far from the truth.

I suppose, he said, that you were present.

I was.

Then sit down, and tell us the whole story, which as yet we have only heard imperfectly.

I took the place which he assigned to me, by the side of Critias the son of Calliaschrus, and when I had saluted him and the rest of the company, I told them the news from the army, and answered their several inquiries.

Then, when there had been enough of this, I, in my turn, began to make inquiries about matters at home—about the present state of philosophy, and about the youth.

Standing as most of you do on the brink of active service, you may find this passage from the Dialogues of Plato at once familiar and remote. Yet if I were to take a text this morning, I think it would be the last two sentences of this same excerpt: "I told them the news from the army, and answered their several inquiries. Then, when there had been enough of this, I, in my turn, began to make inquiries about matters at home—about the present state of philosophy, and about the youth."

You could, if you chose, hear these words with cynical indifference. You could ask, if you chose, who cares about our youth. And as prospective soldier, sailor, or marine, you might ask what you have to do with the state of philosophy either now or later. For most of you, it is true, such questions would be no index to the spirit in which you approach your war assignment. There are moments, however, in which such questions must have occurred to all of you, and the questions would better be faced than lightly dismissed.

Plato's Socrates, of course, is no ordinary man and certainly not the typical old soldier who asks nothing more than an audience prepared to listen to an interminable account of his martial prowess. Now it may be that many of you have more in common with this Socrates than you suspect. Evidently he went to the wars and did his part, but when he returned he had something more in view
than simply becoming a sort of professional legionnaire. War meant a job to be done, but it was in no sense the be-all and end-all of human existence. Returning from the wars, he was ready enough within limits to satisfy the curious, but he felt that enough was enough. What really concerned him was the condition of affairs at home, and his first concern was not for the material prosperity of Athens. Instead, he went straight to the heart of the matter. He asked about "the present state of philosophy and about the youth."

Now, if I am not mistaken, there is a striking similarity between his approach to war and yours. With negligible exceptions, you mean to get on with the job and help finish it, not as an end in itself, but to clear the road to other and more important ends which our American democracy has in view. I shall not suggest that you are not concerned about America's material prosperity or the share you hope one day to have in it. I do suggest that you are not going to be satisfied with material prosperity alone; and in that fact—or, if you prefer, in that attitude—lies our real hope for the future.

Who cares about our youth? For answer, you have only to look around you. It is for youth and its education primarily that institutions like Colgate exist. Their persistence and development is no accident. This college, which you and I have learned to love, represents a century and a quarter of devotion on the part of hundreds of trustees and teachers, thousands of parents and friends, and thousands of alumni—a thong which you now join. Their spirit is reflected not only by their presence at football games or by their financial support of the College; not only by the service flag which now proudly graces this chapel. In the last analysis, this community of devotion to Colgate springs from a more or less conscious sense of the College's educational mission, and the importance of that mission to America and to mankind.

"Thirteen prayers were said with rapt devotion,
Thirteen dollars set the thing in motion,"

we sing; and over the years you can multiply the thirteen prayers and the thirteen dollars and what do you find? A notable aggregation of stone buildings—some new, some mellowed by age—and the physical equipment appropriate to their uses. Yes, but there is something more. You find a spirit which inhabits those buildings and gives them life—an attitude of mind which we of the faculty are constantly, and more or less successfully, trying to communicate to you.

But education, say some, has been a failure; for if it has not failed, why the war? They speak, of course, of liberal education; for the importance of technical proficiency, whether in war or in peace, is something which even the dullest can grasp. But what good, they ask, is your liberal education? It doesn't train you to be a soldier. It doesn't fit you for a trade. It may stuff your head with a lot of fine and noble notions, but when you discover that life is all too seldom fine or noble, the notions will disappear and leave you with an empty head. Of what use, then, will be your cultivated appreciation of beauty, or your concern with notions of justice and truth?
As educators, God knows, we are more acutely aware of our failures than any of our critics can be. We know the confusion that surrounds not so much our objectives as the means by which we seek to approach them. We are painfully aware of the difficulties of communicating to you our deepest convictions and intuitions. As Stevenson has pointed out in that unfinished and amazing treatise on ethics, a portion of which we know under the title of Lay Morals:

"The problem of education (he says) is two-fold: first, to know, and then to utter. Every one who lives any semblance of an inner life thinks more profoundly than he speaks; and the best of teachers can impart only broken images of the truth which they perceive."

The same essay contains some pregnant comments on the difficulties of teachers and especially of parents in knowing what to teach. Too often, the author feels, young men ask for bread and are given cake. For example, speaking of a parent—"he might as well have been speaking of a teacher—Stevenson continues:

As a matter of experience, and in nine hundred and ninety-nine cases out of a thousand, he will instil into his wide-eyed brat three bad things; the terror of public opinion, and, flowing from that as a fountain, the desire of wealth and applause. Besides these, or what might be deduced as corollaries from these, he will teach not much else of any effective value; some dim notions of divinity, perhaps, and book-keeping, and how to walk through a quadrille.

But, you may tell me, the young people are taught to be Christians. It may be want of penetration, but I have not yet been able to perceive it. As an honest man, whatever we teach, and be it good or evil, it is not the doctrine of Christ. What he taught (and in this he is like all other teachers worthy of the name) was not a code of rules, but a ruling spirit; not truths, but a spirit of truth; not views, but a view. What he showed us was an attitude of mind.

The criticism, if not wholly just, is certainly provocative. Yet in suggesting the true objective Stevenson is close to defining the core of a liberal education. We are concerned here at Colgate not merely with philosophies, but with philosophy. We have wanted you as students to develop not attitudes, but an attitude of mind which requires something more than disappointment, or even disillusionment, to shake. We have tried to give you as a guide to living not a code of rules, but a ruling spirit. I say give you; I should have used another word. For these things cannot be given, much less bought or sold. What we really attempt, of course, is to open your eyes to these things and their significance so that you may see them for yourselves, and seeing, believe.

Stevenson's words help to explain the eternal freshness of the life and teachings of Jesus. His parables, for instance, illustrate many homely truths, but pervading them all is the Master's abiding concern for truth. Illustrating in his life and death man's power of fidelity to his highest aspirations, Christ is yet amazingly patient with others. As with Peter he demands much but does
not expect it all at once. His patience seems to spring from a kind of intuitive historical perspective embracing the whole incredible history of man—one of the things which we laboriously seek to help you develop for yourselves. With such a perspective one does not expect the City of God to be built in a day.

Consider for a moment, in the light of such perspective, this charge that the fact of war proves liberal education a failure. Wars are at least as old as human experience and have persisted in breaking out without regard to time or place since long before the day when human history was first unconsciously recorded. The educational process, of course, is no less ancient; but liberal education as we conceive it is by comparison no more than a minute old. We have, to be sure, enjoyed a few centuries of liberal learning and higher education—but education limited more or less strictly to the few. On the whole, it has been left for these United States, and especially for twentieth century America, to develop the concept and to some extent the fact of higher education for all—regardless of economic or social status—who could demonstrate their qualifications.

No one will deny that we have fallen far short of our uniquely ambitious objective. To pronounce this brief experiment a failure, however, because in the first moment of its existence it has not slain the ancient and hydra-headed dragon would be vicious if it were not so absurdly childish. In the sense, then, that Plato or Stevenson or Christ might have used the words, we educators must plead guilty to failures; but we reject the charge of failure.

Who cares about our youth? Nearly everyone who counts. Your families, whether or not they are able to be here today, care terribly. Your friends, among the College faculty, care too. More than that, even though it summons you to battle in no gentle voice, your country greatly cares.

II

It is not merely that you are important to America’s future; you are that future. To assure it, some of you will give your lives in distant battlefields, while others will tackle the assignment—in some ways still more difficult—of devoting themselves to the nation’s service over a longer span and under less unequivocal circumstances. All of you, whether serving with the armed forces or in war industry, in the medical schools or elsewhere, will do your duty. Many of you will do far more than that.

And you will do it not with any sense of cheap heroics or for any shallow slogans, but from the deep conviction that it has to be done. You have learned, I venture to say, that the rights of which we boast are not to be divorced from obligations, and that each generation, in a sense, has to earn them for itself. Your attitude and your performance are the best answers to those who, on superficial and misleading evidence, have charged that your generation is soft or spoiled. No generation is wholly free from specimens that justify the description, but yours I believe is far more free than most.
Will you keep it that way? Will you return from the war with your spirit unimpaired, however sick or weary you may be in body? You will want, and you will have earned, not so much rest as peace—peace in which to re-knit or start anew the plans and the careers which the war has interrupted. You will want, and you will have earned, opportunities to earn your living, raise your families, and pursue happiness. Where are you to look for the assurance of these opportunities?

To industry? To the arts and the professions? To the government? Yes, in part. But in America these groups and agencies are not something apart from us; they are a part of us and we of them. I mean this in no mystical sense; the plain English of it hardly overstates the fact. These agencies will occasionally do things that we detest; things that are utterly alien to our thinking, but that does not mean that we can merely wash our hands and so escape responsibility. In a democracy their actions constitute a challenge; for if we have the skill and imagination and devotion to change these policies we can change them. And we would better face that challenge squarely. But we would better not expect to effect these changes overnight. And unless we are prepared to take our coats off and work and keep on working—unless we are prepared, above all, to work with all kinds of human beings—we can expect nothing but disillusionment.

For the mechanisms of democracy and modern industry have not sprung full-blown from the forehead of any Zeus, and they are intricate and highly sensitive. Only skilled technicians can operate them, but as I have said before, intelligent and responsible direction is the first necessity if the mechanisms are not to run amuck. High purpose without technique is futile; technique without high purpose is fatal.

Thus you may well ask with Socrates one day, as veterans returning from the wars: what of the present state of philosophy? For the future of America will depend not only upon the victory of our arms, not only upon our postwar economic and social adjustments, important as they will be, but upon the attitude and spirit of the American people as a whole. What will be their attitude and their spirit of approach? Will it be impatient and demanding? Or will it display some understanding of the highly complex problems we shall have to face?

War involves, among other things, the reckless expenditure of capital—monetary and economic, human and spiritual. One does not have to be on the battlefield to understand that a vast capital levy—that old Fabian panacea—is now actually in progress. Certainly we shall emerge from the war as a nation, but more particularly as a race, not only weary but sorely impoverished.

How are the world's depleted resources to be restored? Victory will leave us with tools and technical skills sufficient to meet the most exacting demands. Shall we also have the will and the understanding to use these things wisely? Will the churches and the schools and the colleges—will the men and women of America—rise to the occasion as they are rising now? Can we act at once promptly and wisely?
If I may quote Dr. Swarthout, a Colgate alumnus whose presence we welcome here today, our confused and modern world needs more than ever "a gospel of infinite compassion preached by ministers not easily shocked." It would be hard, in my judgment, to find a more acute statement of our needs, or a statement more vividly reflecting the original meaning of the gospel of Christ. Jesus declined to be shocked by human frailty or human folly even when he became their victim. It was only the Pharisees and the hypocrites whom he denounced, and it was only the money changers who exploited the temple, sacred to God and human aspirations, that he scourged. Our ravaged world of broken hopes and shattered families and uprooted men will need this compassionate ministry not only in the church, but in the seats of government and in every community, large or small.

If it is to be rebuilt as well as regenerated, it will also need all the creative energy and daring of youth. Here many of you will find your opportunities for a career which will demand the best you have to give. No shoddy work will serve if the new structure is to withstand the pressures to which it will be subject. Revenge and fear and hate on the one hand, indifference and cynicism on the other, will threaten it, and all these forces are powerful. They are only less powerful than the wisdom and courage and determination with which you can oppose, and it may be, transform them.

Gentlemen of the Class of 1943:

You face today no enviable task, yet there are those of us here who envy you your opportunities. I believe that you will know how to use them. The war will teach you many things which you will want to forget, but it will also teach you much that is worth remembering. Although the time has come for you to take your place at the oars, I beg you to remember that we are all in the same boat. That is obvious, in a sense, so long as the world is at war. It may be less obvious, but it will be equally true, when we set about to establish the conditions of peace.

Doubtless the time will come to you, as it does to every man, when weary with tugging at your oar, you will discover with resentment that there are well-fed passengers asleep in the luxury cabin. Some of you will be tempted to throw them overboard; others will set about scheming to take their place. The majority of you, I hope, will do neither. In the long run these gilded passengers are neither very enviable nor very happy, and on closer acquaintance you might find them most deserving of your pity.

I am not inveighing against ambition; on the contrary ambition is one of the spurs prompting men to assume responsibility. To the limits of your capacity, you have to assume it if the boat we are all in is to stay afloat, much less get anywhere. You will discover then, if not before, what an endlessly difficult thing it is to administer organizations composed of human beings, or to effect a good and workable arrangement of human affairs. You will long for some simple and infallible definition of right and wrong to aid you in making the
decisions which you will have to make, and too often you will find none. For
responsible decisions involving action affect the lives and the fortunes of many
and diverse institutions and human beings; and on immediate issues these inter-
ests frequently conflict. With the best will in the world you will find it diffi-
cult enough to resolve them so as to prevent open conflict and yet satisfy
economic or political or basic human needs.

Perhaps it is fortunate that our imagination cannot compass all of the con-
sequences of action, particularly where heavy responsibilities are involved.
Otherwise, perhaps, our capacity to act might be paralyzed as in some men it
often seems to be. Leadership, for that reason, is not a thing to be assumed
lightly, and it is precisely because it requires capacity to carry responsibili-
ity that the demand for capable leaders—in government, in business, and in the
professions—seems invariably to exceed the supply.

Yet we cannot cut ourselves off from our responsibilities merely by seeking
to dodge them and then criticizing those who are willing to lead. Inaction, too,
has its consequences. If I may borrow again from Stevenson, "the truly quaint
materialism of our view of life disables us from pursuing any transaction to an
end. You can make no one understand that his bargain is anything more than a
bargain, whereas in point of fact it is a link in the policy of mankind, and
either a good or an evil to the world."

War is, in a sense, the very antithesis of much that you have been taught—
and I hope have learned—of what we please to call "the good life." Many of the
things you will have to see and do are so far removed from the gentle precepts
of a civilized home and a liberal college as to make high-sounding slogans about
the purposes of the war seem screaming and mocking insults. For many of you this
sharp contradiction will present the first acid test. Cling for dear life to
your sense of proportion and perspective—yes, even, it may be, to your sense of
humor. Don't forget that in a very real sense the purpose of war is peace.
For what is war but a violent attempt to force a settlement, and respect for
certain standards, where peaceful means have failed?

War scarcely seems to affect the starry firmament without nor does it turn
completely upside down the moral law within. On certain of the virtues it sets
particular store: courage, self-reliance, loyalty, teamwork—and sometimes even
initiative. Cultivate these virtues then, but never forget that the virtues
consistent with the effective prosecution of anything so ruthless and destruc-
tive as war will hardly be sufficient to assure the peaceful reconstruction of
the world.

There, I suspect, no enumeration of the virtues, however comprehensive, will
really suffice. If the world of the future—your world—is to be built on lines
truly hospitable to beauty and truth, to liberty and justice everywhere, the
architects and the builders down to the most insignificant laborers will have to
be men of virtue. And so long as one virtuous man remains we have the divine
promise that the city—or, if you prefer, our civilized community—shall never
be destroyed.