

External Affairs  
Supplementary Paper

No. 54/7 Text of address given by Mr. Dag Hammarskjöld, Secretary-General of the United Nations, at a Convocation of Carleton College, Ottawa, on February 26, 1954. At this Convocation, Mr. Hammarskjöld received the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws.

(See also Supplementary Paper 54/6 containing Mr. Hammarskjöld's speech in Toronto on February 25, 1954.)

It is with gratitude that I accept the honorary degree which you have just conferred upon me. To receive the first such award given since the founding of Carleton College twelve years ago is for me a distinct honour. I am happy to have become in this manner associated with the unique history and splendid record of this young and flourishing institution.

It is also a privilege for me, on my official visit to Ottawa as Secretary-General of the United Nations, to have this opportunity of being with you and speaking to you here today. I particularly appreciate this as I regard your invitation as an expression of your interest and faith in the United Nations.

With your fellow students at other universities in the western world, you share the extraordinary responsibility which our times put on all who by ability, education, experience or position are called upon to provide moral and intellectual leadership. Let me address myself this afternoon to a few aspects of this responsibility.

In modern publicity we find a persistent tendency to present our age and the world in which we live in headline terms and emotional slogans. This melodramatic aspect of the mass media with which our eyes and ears are assailed on every hand tends in some respects to dull our awareness of the real problems and blunt our interest in the essential issues. Nevertheless, these slogans, these pointed headlines, can be taken as a starting point for a brief review of the challenge of our time since they do indicate basic problems even if, too often, they are exaggerated in form and superficial in their perspective.

It is said that our time is the age of the decisive fight between freedom and tyranny. It is true that such a fight is going on. But it has always been fought and I don't believe that I could justifiably be called a pessimist for expressing my belief that this fight will never be over.

In that fight those who have had the privilege of a broad education and who have been trained in free and independent thinking carry a special responsibility. They must go beyond the surface and find what are the real issues. They must see the dangers to our civilization where they really rest and recognize the elements on which we can base our hopes. History and environment have shaped different peoples and nations in very different ways.



An independent man, wanting to make a true contribution to the victory over destructive forces which have always threatened progress, must keep this in mind when he tries to judge what is the true reflection in the lives of others of ideals cherished by himself. He should never condemn others merely because they may have chosen other ways than his own to achieve freedom, and he should remember that Mephistopheles, speaking our own language and walking around in our midst, is more dangerous than the devil we paint on the wall. We can have no success in our fight against outward threats against freedom unless we vanquish tyranny and its good helper, fear, in our own societies. That truly is the duty of all favoured by and representing liberal education.

Another phrase which we often meet and which may flatter our minds is that our time is the age of democracy. Well, we have seen a remarkable development in the direction of self-determination and self-rule--by, for, and of the peoples -- and we have seen an impressive growth of democratic institutions in our own countries and in many parts of the world. But even in a restricted political sense of the word democracy we are still far from the goal. If we dig deeper we will find that we are only at the beginning of a slow and difficult process. Equal political rights, equal influence on the government -- these cannot be fully realized until and unless all voters are given equal possibilities to judge for themselves. If we recognize this, we are led on to the economic and social aspects of democracy and, looking at the problem from those angles, I think we must all admit that true democracy is still to be achieved.

On the other hand, even if we have a long way to go, it may justly be said that our time deserves to be called an age of democracy at least in the sense that at no previous stage in history has the ideal of democracy been so generally recognized and such determined efforts made to translate the ideal into reality. Let us, however, remember that the term, if we use it for this reason, should be regarded as a challenge, not as an expression of a completed task.

The problems of that vast majority of humanity which lives in the so-called under-developed countries are closely related to the question I have just mentioned. We are seeing the beginning of an era where previously dependent countries are coming into their own. With this in mind our time has been called an age of revolution. Here again a note of warning is called for. It is true that we are passing through a dramatic stage of transition in the great under-developed part of the world. But history tells us that the beginnings of this go far back in time and undoubtedly the process will stretch far into the future. It is a question of organic growth which can be delayed or accelerated, guided in a constructive direction, or left at the mercy of the strong and chaotic forces at play. What we see happening represents an acute challenge to the more highly developed nations with their greater resources. What has to be done cannot be achieved through any kind of revolution which, in a brief span of time, would give us a new world. In fact, nothing is of greater importance for a peaceful and constructive development of these lands toward freedom and an equal place in the world than to respect the laws of natural growth,



guiding and helping the necessary change without impatience for overnight results.

It is sometimes said of our time that it is an age which marks the death of nationalism and should call for a far-reaching revision of old ideas of national sovereignty. Put in this way, I think the statement is misleading. Nationalism is very much what it always was, and the willingness to restrict national sovereignty is not very great even in spheres where the sacrifice would seem to be small. But this way of characterizing our age is also true in a sense. Ours is a time of a new internationalism which, perhaps, is not of our choice but, nevertheless, must be recognized as inescapable in our world of today with its new means of communication, its new economic interdependence and its new political relationships. This internationalism also presents a challenge. It is probable that it will, step by step, bring about an evolution of national concepts and policies which in the future may have a greater effect upon national sovereignty than is evident today. The United Nations is an expression of this new internationalism, a response to a world-wide need which has arisen. However, as you certainly know, the organization is not vested with any sovereign powers. The only exception to this principle is that the Security Council may enforce certain action, provided that its five permanent members are agreed -- a possibility which, for obvious reasons, today is highly theoretical. It is not likely that a world organization embracing so many disparate and, at times, antagonistic systems of government and national cultures could be held together today on any other basis. The United Nations, therefore, must rely for the present mainly on the processes of negotiation, persuasion and consent to accomplish its purposes and, above all, on the exercise of enlightened and moral leadership by those in positions of responsibility.

It is said that our time is the age of global wars. This is true in the sense that everybody, in one way or another, was a co-sufferer in the Second World War and in the sense that all the Great Powers were parties to the conflict. It is also true in the sense that a new major conflict would undoubtedly, in the same way, draw everybody into its orbit. But it would be false if it were to lead us to shut our eyes to the fact that we still suffer and may have to suffer from wars on a restricted scale and in limited areas which, in their effect on the human lives concerned, are just as terrible as the major wars. It is our duty to feel moral responsibility for a war in a remote part of the world as strongly as we would feel for a war in which we ourselves, or those dear to us, were directly threatened in a physical sense.

Frequently, these days, we also hear our time called the atomic age. Of course, the discoveries and inventions which make the tremendous forces hidden in the atom available as a new source of power have opened a new era. I feel, however, that the name "atomic age" would more rightly be applied to a time when the new power is used to improve the conditions of life for mankind than to a time which has so far only added this power to the already frightful arsenal of which we dispose for our self-destruction. What made the proposal of President Eisenhower in the United Nations so encouraging and so constructive was the strong expression he gave to his desire for, and his faith in, the possibility of initiating a true atomic age.



All these various names given to our time have been coined and used in the world press, by the radio, on television -- those powerful modern media which have opened the way to such vast new possibilities for mass information. These media have themselves, in fact, wrought a revolution in the life of peoples in some ways just as important, or more important, than the other changes I have mentioned. The possibilities of mass information have, in some cases, been -- and may be -- destructive in their consequences. But they may also be used as powerful instruments for guidance to true democracy and for peaceful development and true understanding between peoples. Experience shows that ruthless leaders may with the help of these instruments work up feelings of hatred both within a nation and between nations. It is for those responsible to use mass information for the opposite purpose. In the world of the mind, and of all those techniques of word and sound and image that reach in mind, it is also important to seek to turn swords into ploughshares.

If I myself were to add to the long list of labels given to our time, I would, in the light of what I have said, suggest that we call it the age of responsibility. The phrase is obviously open to objections for the very same reasons as apply to some of the expressions I have already commented upon: it is in a sense superficial and, in historical perspective, it may be said to be exaggerated. All the same, I feel that the elements of truth reflected in the other labels for our age are sufficiently serious to justify the conclusion that we are now at a juncture where the responsibility of those who are called upon to be leaders is wider and more far-reaching than ever before.

You may ask me: To whom do you address yourself? Who is, then, called upon to be a leader? My reply would be: Everybody who can exert influence -- inside a small group, in his country or all over the world. Herodotus said that of all the sorrows that afflict mankind, the bitterest is this, that one should have consciousness of much but control over nothing. That may be true. Who of us has control over life? But what he said would be misleading and a false expression of defeatism if we were to conclude that because we do not have control, we therefore have no responsibility. The possibility of influence, which rests with everybody, is a sufficient basis for responsibility.

Those who have had the privilege of a university education have a special duty. They have a special obligation to maintain their sense of proportion in judging events inside their community and in relation to other peoples. They have to keep awake their sense of what are the true values. They must respect truth.

They must show that respect for man and life which grows out of a true perspective on man and life. Finally, they must have the humility of one who thoroughly knows his own limitations but also the scope of the demands which face him in our time.

