

## University of Notre Dame News and Information

ND Newswire

### Notre Dame Commencement Speakers

DENNIS BROWN AND GAIL HINCHION MANCINI • DATE: MAY 13, 2001

University of Notre Dame graduates have heard from a diverse group of Commencement speakers through the years: presidents, prime ministers and other government officials; ambassadors, actors and attorneys; writers, editors and educators; judges, generals and even a G-man.

This year's speaker, President Bush, is the eighth U.S. president to be awarded an honorary degree by the University and the fifth to be the Commencement speaker. Bush's father was the most recent president to speak to Notre Dame graduates, delivering an address on family values and service to community at the 1992 Sesquicentennial Year exercises.

The American family is "an institution under siege," Bush said. "Today's crisis will have to be addressed by millions of Americans at the personal, individual level for governmental programs to be effective. And the federal government, of course, must do everything it can do, but the point is, government alone is simply not enough."

On June 5, 1960, President Dwight Eisenhower delivered the University's first presidential Commencement speech, interrupting the 45th reunion of his class at the U.S. Military Academy to make the trip.

In his 20-minute address, Eisenhower foreshadowed a U.S. government on the verge of social and political change, and one facing the difficult task of striking the right balance.

"We do not want governmental programs which, advanced, often falsely, in the guise of promoting the general welfare destroy in the individual those priceless qualities of self-dependence, self-confidence, and a readiness to risk his judgement against the trends of the crowd," Eisenhower said. "We do want a government that assures the security and general welfare of the nation and its people in concord with the philosophy of Abraham Lincoln, who insisted that government should do, and do only, the things which people cannot well do for themselves."

President Jimmy Carter made what many regard as the key foreign policy address of his presidency at the 1977 exercises. The president spoke of a diminishing threat from the Soviet Union, a notion dismissed as naive at the time but which proved prophetic. At the same time, he advocated the creation of new global alliances and championed human rights, policies built upon the "new reality of a politically awakening world."

Four years later, security was exceptionally tight when President Ronald Reagan made his first public appearance after the attempt on his life in March 1981. Reagan had had an indirect association with Notre Dame ever since his portrayal of Fighting Irish football legend George Gipp in the 1940 film "Knute Rockne, All-American." The president was reunited with his costar in the movie, Pat O'Brien, who also received an honorary degree.

Melding his personas as the "Gipper" and president, Reagan promised to win one for the "private sector" by shrinking the nation's government. Americans, Reagan said, "have made it plain they want an end to excessive government intervention in their lives and in the economy."

. Reagan also told the graduates about a need for a strong national defense. But he predicted, "The West will not contain Communism, it will transcend Communism. We'll dismiss it as a sad, bizarre chapter in human history whose last pages are even now being written."

President John F. Kennedy – the nation's only Catholic president – received the Laetare Medal, Notre Dame's highest honor, in a White House ceremony in 1961, and as a U.S. congressman in 1950 delivered the winter Commencement address and received an honorary degree.

Notre Dame also awarded honorary degrees to Presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Gerald Ford, but those were at special academic convocations, not at Commencements.

Kennedy's grandfather, John F. Fitzgerald, and father, Joseph P. Kennedy, served as Notre Dame Commencement speakers in 1915 and 1941, respectively. JFK's brother-in-law, former Peace Corps director R. Sargent Shriver, spoke to the class of 1961.

The profile of Commencement speakers in Notre Dame's early years was considerably lower than in recent times – with one exception.

Founded in 1842 by Holy Cross priest Father Edward F. Sorin, the University held its inaugural Commencement in 1845, and the first with true baccalaureate graduates took place four years later. Neal Gillespie and Richard Shortis received Notre Dame's first diplomas and Gillespie was one of several speakers to address the assembly.

Commencement speakers for the next several years included local educators, priests and attorneys, but that changed in 1865 when the guest of honor was Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman, commander of the famous Civil War "March to the Sea." During the war, Sherman had sent two sons, Willy and Tommy, to Notre Dame and a daughter, Minnie, to Saint Mary's College. All three were enrolled in the "Minims" department for children ages 6-13. Willy died of "camp fever" during summer vacation in 1863 and the visit to Notre Dame two years later was emotionally trying for Sherman.

The New York Tablet reported that Sherman received a "hearty cheer" from the Notre Dame students. He spoke at length of the "dangers of the battle of life" awaiting the graduates, but assured them of the "final triumph of the right."

Of the remainder of 19th-century Notre Dame Commencement speakers, Rev. J. Lancaster Spalding, bishop from Peoria, Ill., is the standout. The University's most frequent Commencement speaker, he addressed the classes of 1878, '86, '90, '91, '95 and '99.

During the first two decades of the 20th century, Notre Dame began to attract government officials as Commencement speakers, among them Sen. John Gearin of Oregon, Secretary of the Navy Joseph Bonaparte (later attorney general in Theodore Roosevelt's administration), Gov. Thomas Marshall of Indiana, Gov. James Cox of Ohio, Sen. Joseph Ransdell of Louisiana, and the previously mentioned John F. Fitzgerald, mayor of Boston.

Other notable speakers through the years included Dr. William Mayo, cofounder of the Mayo Clinic, in 1936; FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, who spoke at the 1942 Centennial Year graduation ceremonies; and Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren in 1957.

Since 1960 the principal speakers at Commencement have been increasingly well known, coming from all walks of life. Among them:

– Government figures Henry Cabot Lodge (1962), Eugene McCarthy (1967), Andrew Young (1988) and Elizabeth Dole (1999)

– Canadian Prime Ministers Lester Pearson (1963) and Pierre Trudeau (1982), the president of El Salvador (and Notre Dame alumnus) Jose Napoleon Duarte (1985), Irish Taoiseach Albert Reynolds (1994) and U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan (2000)

– Former Yale University President Kingman Brewster, Jr. (1972), former Harvard University President Derek Bok (1987),

UCLA professor Rosemary Park (1974) and Stanford Provost (and now national security adviser in the Bush administration) Condoleezza Rice, a Notre Dame alumna

? Urban League Executive Director Vernon Jordan (1976)

? Actor Bill Cosby (1990) and former commissioner of baseball Peter Ueberroth (1989)

? Cardinal Joseph Bernardin (1983) and Bishop James Malone (1986)

? Journalists William F. Buckley, Jr. (1978), Tom Brokaw (1993) and Mark Shields (1997)

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