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James Earl Carter Jr.

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Recommended Citation

Carter, James Earl Jr., "Text of Remarks by Former President Jimmy Carter at Trinity College Commencement Ceremony, May 17, 1998" (1998). *Archival Materials and Documents Collections*. 15. <https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/trinarchives/15>

**Text of Remarks by Former President Jimmy Carter
at Trinity College Commencement Ceremony
May 17, 1998**

Thank you for the honor which has been bestowed upon me and the additional honor of being permitted to address you, the graduating class, and the families and professors who helped to arrange this turning point in your lives. I've listened to the accolades being presented to my fellow awardees today with a great deal of gratification at being in their presence. I don't know if all of the students know, but your president and his wife worked for me not only during my presidential campaign but also full-time in the White House. So, I share in the credit for all the wonderful things that go on here at Trinity College!

Just a few weeks ago I was in Pretoria, South Africa, visiting my oldest grandson, Jason. He graduated from college last May and is in the Peace Corps now. He has been in South Africa for a few months. We arrived in Pretoria. We were going to visit Jason the following day, but first we were going to go by and see President Mandela, whom I've known for many years. Jason heard about this prospective visit and asked if we would let him come from his Peace Corps assignment and join us on our visit with President Mandela. He said he wanted to visit a politician who went to jail before he was in office!

When I told him that I was going to make the graduating speech here at Trinity, he said, "Papa, it's very unlikely that they will remember anything you say so just be brief." Well, I've taken that on as a challenge. I'm going to be brief, but I also want you to try to remember three things that I say.

The first one is about money returned. I just finished writing my twelfth book, plus one that I wrote with my wife. This new book doesn't relate to you -- it's called *The Virtues of Aging*. But, my previous book was *Living Faith*, and I've abstracted from *Living Faith* (which Rosalynn asked me to announce is still on sale!), a story that illustrates my first point. A man died and went to Heaven and was met, as is the custom I understand, by Saint Peter, at the pearly gates. He was standing there with an angel and a fellow walked up and Saint Peter said, "What makes you think you're qualified to come into heaven?" And the man said, "Well, I've been a member of my church all my life. I've been an executive in my church. I worked my way all the way up to the top of a Baptist church. I was chairman of the finance committee. And I have studied the Bible. I just lived the best life I could." And Saint Peter said, "Well, that's all very interesting but what have you done for other people?" And the man thought for a while and he finally said, "Well, I remember back in the Depression years everybody was very poor and this family came by my house -- a man and his wife and three kids and they were very hungry and I had pity on them. I told my wife to go in the kitchen and fix them some sandwiches. And my wife put them into a nice paper sack and gave them to the family to eat. I would guess the sandwiches in the Depression years were worth probably about fifty cents." Saint Peter said, "Well, is that all?" The man said, "No, as a matter of fact just a few minutes ago my neighbor's house burned down. We found an old table on our back porch and we gave it to the neighbor when he moved into an apartment, to help furnish his place." And Saint Peter said, "Do you have any price to put on it?" He said, "Well, it's probably worth at least fifty cents." Saint Peter said to the angel, "Go

down to the earth and check on the accuracy of this report." So the angel went down and in a few minutes came back and said, "Yes, sir. It's accurate. What shall we do with it?" Saint Peter said, "Give him his dollar back and tell him to go to hell." So, that's the first point I want to make and I want you to remember at least that story.

But I want to get more serious for a minute and talk about my own background. I grew up in the South. Reverend Butts' family lived not too far from where I lived, where we experienced racial discrimination for generations following slavery. The Carter Center has programs in 35 African nations, and we see those countries torn apart by war -- quite often brought about by discrimination because of race or ethnic background or even religion, as is the case in Sudan. But I would say that the greatest discrimination on earth today is by rich people against poor people. This is a discrimination that is not deliberate. It's not something we planned. It's something that is there by default.

Who are the rich people? I would say, everyone here is a rich person. I would characterize a rich person, at least for the time being, as someone who has a decent home in which to live, a modicum of education, reasonable health care. He or she has a job or at least the prospect of one, thinks that the police and the judicial system are on his side, is not afraid to go to out her front door, at least in the daytime. And the rich people are those who think that if they make a decision, it will make a difference, at least in their own lives. Those are the rich people.

The poor people are our neighbors -- like some of those being blessed by the new program at Trinity College who live down the road and who don't have any of

those blessings of life. It doesn't take a deliberate decision to ignore the plight of our neighbors. How many of us actually know a poor person? Maybe our maid ... or the fellow that mows the lawn. If we do, do we know them well enough to go to their home and have a cup of coffee? Or get to know the names of their teenage children? Or God forbid, invite them to our house for a cup of coffee and let their kids get to know ours. There's a chasm that exists in the lives of those of us who are blessed with almost everything we could possibly want and others whom we are inclined to ignore. That's my first point.

The second point is about a female politician. I was born in 1924 and in that year, Texas had a woman governor. Her name was Ma Ferguson. Her husband had been governor before her. To show you how history doesn't change much, in Texas the big argument was, "What do we do about the Spanish language in school?" Hot debate now in California. As you know, she was in the U.S. Congress. And the debate went on in Texas until finally Ma Ferguson got tired of the debate, and she decided to end it once and for all. She stood before the parliament and the radios. She held up the King James Bible and she said, "If English was good enough for Jesus Christ, it's good enough for Texas."

We're inclined to live in an encapsulated world of our own creation. We like to be with people who are just like us. The same color. The same kind of clothes. The same kind of automobile. The same kind of houses. Go to the same place to worship. But there's a vast world out there. Not just in our own country but in other nations, as well.

Not too long ago, I was in East Africa on one of our Carter Center trips, and I

happened to be sitting at a table with eight leaders. I knew that the next week I was scheduled to go to New Orleans to make a speech to presidents of southeastern colleges about the role of universities in foreign countries. I had a little hand-held tape recorder and I passed it around to the leaders at my table. I asked them to give me a comment on what American universities meant to them -- to their countries. I recorded their comments, and I brought some excerpts from their comments. This is exactly what they said. The Finance Minister from Seychelles said, "They are rarely relevant." The next person was from Uganda. She happened to be Vice President of the country and she was also the Minister of Agriculture. She's still serving. I was with her about a month ago. She said, "What is known is not shared with those needing to know. Information is just exchanged among academics. To know where there's hunger, to have personal knowledge of torture or see a denuded landscape: How many university presidents have been in a village where river blindness is prevalent or Guinea worm a constant plague? We cannot even get our agriculture research scientists to go out into the fields and they look at the extension workers and farmers as inferiors." The Prime Minister of Guyana was there. He said, "We know that almost everything is connected - health, nutrition, environmental quality, political stability, human rights. Some leading educators understand this, but the information is not even shared with our government ministers, whose decisions control our lives." The Health Minister from Zambia said, "Universities should be where the highest ideals are preserved. But we witness little interest in our problems." My favorite quote was from Nigeria. A man said, "One action is better than one hundred conferences." And he also said, if you'll

pardon my saying this, "No American university has done as much for us as Amy Carter." At that time, Amy had been arrested four times for demonstrating against apartheid in South Africa. I rode back home with a scientist whose work has brought direct benefits to almost every person on earth. And he said to me, and I quote him, "In the education of my own children, I want them to acquire three things. First of all, an inquisitive mind. Always exploring new ideas. Questioning old ones. Not afraid to challenge the status quo. Second, I want them to know that there is a cause-and-effect relationship. This is not a fatalistic world inhabited by people whose suffering is inevitable and whose problems cannot be solved. And third, I want them to know that they are world citizens. Their lives are inextricably tied to those in other nations. I want them to be eager to learn foreign languages," he said, "forced to, if necessary."

We've got a great country -- I'm going to talk about it in a minute -- but I want to make my third point. I received an award today from Trinity, one of the few colleges, as you know, that has engineering and also liberal arts combined. I'm very proud of that and it reminded me of a story that illustrates the third point I want to make. And that is, we should never, ever limit what we can imagine or dream or conceive. There was a young man in college who was very proud of himself, very arrogant, a smart aleck who alienated even his own professors. And he was so sure of himself that he really didn't do much work. But he was brilliant. I'm sure he was studying engineering! When he got toward the end of the year his professors were doubtful about whether they were going to pass him or not. So they pulled him in and they said, "We'll give you a test. If you can tell us how to measure the

height of a building with a barometer, we'll give you a passing grade." He said, "Well, there are several ways to do that. Which one do you want?" And they said, "What do you mean several ways? We just want one way." And he said, "No, three, four ways...you tell me how many, I'll give you the answer." The professor was aggravated and he said, "Okay, tell us how to do it several ways." And the student said, "Well, first of all you get a barometer and you put it on the ground and you measure its height and then you measure the length of the shadow. And then you measure the length of the shadow of the building and you can figure out the height of the building." And the professor said, "Okay, that's one way. What else?" He said, "Well, you get the barometer and you go to the top of the building and you tie a string to it and you lower it down to the ground and then you measure the length of the string and you have height of the building." The professor was getting more aggravated but he was also intrigued. He said, "Well, what else?" The student said, "Well, you get the barometer and you get a stop watch. You go back up to the top of the building and you drop the barometer and you measure how long it takes to hit the ground. Check out the stop watch and you can very easily compute how far it fell." By that time the business dean came by and the two professors consulted a little bit. The business dean said to the student, "Well, if you can figure out a way to use a barometer, using business principles, to measure the height of a building, we'll give you a good grade." The student said, "Well, you take this nice barometer and you go over to the office of the building superintendent and you say, 'If you tell me how high this building is, I'll give you this barometer.'"

Well, that's the final point I want to make. I want you to remember those

stories, if you don't remember anything else. I think that the last story illustrates the fact that we have a wide range of options in facing life. We're all obviously unique. We've all been blessed. I happen to have been president of the greatest nation on earth which, at that time, had to share the superpower status with the Soviet Union. Now we're the only superpower on earth. And the character of our nation is really shaped by the totality of the American public.

What is the character of a superpower? That is a question that we haven't adequately answered. It's been a few years since The Cold War ended. I think our country is still searching for its top priorities. Obviously, we ought to be intensely committed to peace - not only for ourselves but for others. My wife and I figured recently that we've now been in 125 nations since I left the White House. It's distressing sometimes in some of those very poor and isolated nations that they don't look on the United States as a champion of peace. They feel that we are too ready to use military power to accomplish our purposes. Another element of our priority should be freedom and democracy. Every time there's a struggling, embryonic democracy ready to hold elections to replace a totalitarian power, perhaps to end a war, the United States ought to be there, in the forefront, devoting whatever part of our tremendous economic or military or political or moral power is available. We should always be the champion of human rights. We should espouse environmental quality and demonstrate that our belief is genuine. And we should be willing to share our wealth with others.

We're the richest country in the world, but we're also the stingiest country in the world among those that have a modicum of wealth. There was a poll out

recently that asked the American people, "What portion of our annual budget do you think goes for foreign aid?" And the average answer was 17%. The real answer is .3 of 1 percent. Japan gives more foreign aid than we do for humanitarian purposes. So does France. So does Germany. Every time an American gives a dollar, a Norwegian gives twenty dollars for foreign aid.

I've been concerned recently, as have you, about India's explosion of five nuclear devices. I know the Indians well. My mother served there in the Peace Corps when she was seventy years old. I think I'm the last president who visited India, the largest democracy in the world. A very proud country. They look at the United States with admiration but also have a deep concern. We claim we're for the comprehensive test ban to prevent all testing of nuclear weapons. But we still haven't ratified the treaty. We claim we want to reduce nuclear arsenals. The Start 2 Treaty was passed about eight years ago, but still has not been ratified, by us or the Duma, the parliament of Russia. We claim to be committed to the protection of human beings, at least civilians, from weapons. We were the foremost opponent of outlawing landmines. It is wrong for us to tell India, "You cannot have a nuclear device. We'll keep our eight thousand or so. We're not ready to reduce them yet."

Which brings me now to my last point. What do we do as individual human beings, with the resources that we have? That's not an easy question to answer. But I'd like to put it into perspective just a moment. Suppose you went to a doctor and the doctor said, "I'm sorry but the last test on you came back malignant and you have two months to live." You would be faced with a decision -- "What will I do for my two months?" Maybe some would go to Panama City and celebrate the last two

months. Most of us would want to put our lives in order. We'd want to stretch our hearts and minds. We'd want to spend some time with the people for whom we cared. We would want to forgive those against whom we have a grudge. We might want to let the people we love know it. Suppose we went back to the doctor and he said, "I made a terrible mistake. You have twenty more years to live." Would we change our priorities during those last twenty years?

Graduating from college is a turning point. It's a time of unprecedented freedom to make choices about life. And I think we're faced in these modern days with the same choice that existed two thousand years ago. The people of Corinth asked Saint Paul a similar question. They asked him, in effect, "What is the most important thing in life?" What they were really asking was, "What are the things that never change?" And Saint Paul gave them an answer that was hard to understand -- and this may be the fourth thing you want to remember -- "the things you cannot see" are the most important. What are the things you can't see? You can see a bank account. Is that important? You can see a beautiful house. You can see your name in the paper. But you can't see justice. You can't see peace. You can't see service and humility and compassion. Those are the important things. And there was one more thing that Paul mentioned, and that is love.