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## Commencement 5/21/1977

Joan Adams Mondale

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MACALESTER  
COLLEGE

COMMENCEMENT  
1977

[00:21]

...our greatest efforts. And in turn, it has rewarded, by enabling us to grow and attain new levels of understanding and the capacity and the willingness to better serve. It has drawn us to a sense of private and collective responsibility for improving the human condition. Here, and beyond the confines of nation and continent, we are an international community of students, teachers, and scholars. The world should be a better place for our having spent the baccalaureate years in the shadow of Old Main. Macalester belongs to all who have worked and studied here. And each of us carries the happy but difficult burden of her future. We cannot be careless of the great lessons we have learned. We cannot release ourselves from the task of separating the cheap and the tawdry and the unlovely from our lives. We cannot be excused from finding the loveliness and the beauty in acts of thought and kindness and intelligence. For of such is to be found the hallmark of the educated man and woman. Macalester will need your thoughtful criticism and your support in the years ahead. For in a variety of ways, diversity and choice and option in human endeavor is being challenged. The great and the good private liberal arts colleges must not be permitted to disappear from our landscape. To parents, and grandparents, uncles and aunts, brothers and sisters, wives and friends of Macalester's graduating class, I bring you a welcome this day, to this happy celebration.

[02:47]

Commencement is also an occasion for recognizing not only the graduates of the latest class, but for acknowledging distinction among graduates of former classes. At this time, recipients of Distinguished Citizen alumni citations will be presented by the President of the Macalester Alumni Association, Ruth Ann Debeer Stricker. [applause]

[03:34]

RS: Dr. Davis and Mr. Garrison, it gives me great honor on behalf of the Alumni Association to make these presentations today. We have three of them.

First, Lawrence E. Aurelius, Class of 1923. [applause] Lawrence Aurelius, for your professional accomplishments in the field of dentistry and for your humanitarian endeavors, we present you with the Alumni Distinguished Citizens Citation [applause].

William J. Bell, class of 1910. [applause] William Bell, for your more than six decades of service to your fellow man as a missionary, pastor, and friend, we are happy to present you with the Alumni Distinguished Citizens Citation. [applause]

Lyle French, class of 1937. [applause]

[05:50]

It has become an appropriate custom on the occasion of commencement to bring to the attention of students, faculty, staff and friends the fact that some who are with us will not be with us and

some who were with us during the year are not with us. In this case, I report what is well known to faculty, staff, and students. The great loss Macalester sustained in the loss of Professor Harry Hammer who served as chairman of our Music Department. Quiet, dignified, patient, but knowing exactly what was proper and necessary for the strength of the Music Department, his loss is shared by all who knew and know Macalester. This year, retiring from the faculty, Professor Evelyn Albinson of the German department, and Professor Franz Westermeier, also from the German Department, may I ask that they stand and be acknowledged. [applause]

[07:24]

And may I report that from our great staff, two have retired this year. I would hope they were here and on the reading of both names, ask that they stand. Let us applaud anyway. Marie Hannahan, administrative secretary in the office of news and publications, and Mary Francis, senior secretary in the English department, both of whom have many more than ten years of service to this Macalester.

[08:04]

...between the home and the family, the world of politics and aesthetics, and she [Joan Mondale] has made a significant mark in each. Macalester is proud to welcome her back. [applause]

[08:45]

JM: I'm glad to be here, and I come with a real sense of returning home. And I'm grateful to you for your warm greeting. For me, 1977 has been a year of getting used to new roles, several

of them. But the newest role for me is that of commencement speaker. I'm struck rather forcefully today as I was on my graduation by the ironies of commencement. Having spent four years sitting row on row, listening to lectures, now you celebrate the end of it all sitting row on row, listening to speeches. And just when you're eager to cast off the encumbering garments and academic life, the rules, the requirements, the rigors of tests and exams, you are required, as your last academic act, to put on a heavy cap and gown of the commencement ritual [laughter].

[10:03]

I remember my first freshman morning at Macalester was registration day. I signed up for freshman communications, for science, and for world history and Old Testament. My father taught Old Testament [laughter]. And that was the subject I really had to prepare for and I always did that homework first, and political science. There was a long waiting list for Ted Mitau's course, and I was lucky to be in the class. We met at 8 o'clock in the top floor of the old science hall. And I'll never forget the first day in class. Ted Mitau had just gotten his doctorate from the University of Minnesota, he walked in the class and wrote democracy across two bulletin boards, as though he were shouting the words. He was an extraordinary teacher and no one ever went to sleep in his class. He sparked my interest as did so many other teachers here. There was a spirit of openness, we were encouraged to reach out for new ideas and fresh approaches. Macalester wasn't tight and rigid then, and it isn't today today. A Macalester professor never said, there is only one way. I'm determined not to paint too rosy a picture, but I do feel strongly that I was lucky as you have been, to have pursued my education in a special setting.

[11:43]

Macalester need not try, as its giant sister institutions must, to be all things to all people. This college is free to be some things to some people. And that, in an age of bigness and conformity, is both a luxury and an opportunity. In the age of mass media and merchandising of megatons and multiversities, colleges like Macalester have certain advantages. Advantages that are quite beyond the capacity of great educational factories. One of these advantages is a sense of community. If you're like me, you absorbed that sense quite unconsciously here. And you've taken it quite for granted. But you will learn, especially if your next step is a large university, or a major business corporation, or life in a large city, just how important that sense of community is. For the old experience of community, of closeness, of fellow feeling, is growing bigger among us and therefore precious. And it gives me some relief to know that it was a big anonymous university, not at Macalester, that a student was seen wearing the sign "I am a student. Please do not bend, fold, spindle or mutilate me." Another is a healthy concern for values. An impulse not merely to pass on knowledge, but to ask how we should use that knowledge. And that too is growing more rare. We are a society with a genius for devising ways of doing things. But we're not nearly so good, I'm afraid, at asking which things are worth doing. Or whether they should be done at all. Because of these advantages, I cherish what this place has meant to me and I hope what it has meant to you. But the commencement tradition is to talk about the future, and not the past. And that's what I've come to do. Although I intend with the remainder of my remarks to depart from tradition.

[14:22]

Alice in Wonderland must have been delighted when she was introduced the concept of the unbirthday. After all, it was explained to her, each one of us only has one birthday to celebrate,

whereas there are 364 unbirthdays. I mentioned that inspired notion because it's my purpose here today to deliver an uncommencement speech. I've heard a great many commencement speeches, and some of them have left me feeling vaguely dissatisfied. The typical commencement speaker says to his young audience, "you are the best educated, the most intelligent, the most skilled and able generation in history." [laughter]

[15:16]

Well...[laughter] I'm not so sure. I don't want to take anything away from the class of 1977. But the ancient Greeks were rather impressive, don't you think? And the Renaissance. I seem to remember some skill and intelligence there. When I was told that my generation was the best educated, the most intelligent and so on, I shifted uncomfortably in my chair. I didn't feel terribly brilliant. Or skilled. Or accomplished. I felt eager, and excited, and uncertain. And very green. So I won't patronize you. As an uncommencement speaker, I will say simply, that you have in your lives a marvelous opportunity. The opportunity to become educated, intelligent, skilled, and able. It will probably take the rest of your life. You may never feel that you have completely succeeded. But the effort, if you keep at it, will make your life very rich indeed, and it will help you to enrich the world. You know, the next chapter of the commencement speech is that our troubled world needs you.

[17:08]

Needs you, that is. To repair all the damage done by the older generation. Well, heaven knows the world is troubled and heaven knows the older generation has made some incredible mistakes. But it occurs to me that the older generation and several older generations deserve a word or two of praise. For we have also done some things right. We pass on to you a lively working

democracy. A bit battered perhaps but essentially intact. A record of breathtaking scientific and technical achievements from miracle drugs to men on the moon. A wealth of cultural and educational institutions which have their faults but also do great good, like the college from which you graduate today. Of course your world needs you, it needs you not only to correct, but also to continue what your parents have done. If the future is anything like the past, you too will make some mistakes. Many of them. And you will also achieve great things. You may live to see your children's generation coming of age, flowing with the confidence of youth, certain that they can do a better job than yours. Finally, but by no means least, the typical commencement speaker urges you to get involved to plunge up to your neck in politics, or public service.

Stepping back into Pandora's box all the plagues that she unleashed so many years ago. To which I, the uncommencement speaker reply, all right, get involved, if you want to. If it's right for you, but only if, for it occurs to me that many great things indeed have been achieved by those who chose not to leap into the mainstream, like novels, and symphonies, and paintings, works achieved by people who stood aside for a while, or for a lifetime, from the practical problem solving world.

[19:50]

One of my abiding preoccupations is art in America, art and all of its unpredictable richness and diversity. I spent some of my time going around encouraging artists, encouraging our citizens to support and enjoy the arts, but again and again I am struck by how much we owe those who enrich our lives without "solving problems". These people work in quiet isolation in lofts and studios. They pay little attention to headlines, clocks or schedules. We are infinitely richer for their noninvolvement. And I would defend to the last, their right and yours to let the world go

by, to be sure your joyful moments of noninvolvement need not produce high art, I spent some of my happiest hours at a humming potter's wheel with the light slamming through the window and the clamoring world at bay, creating pots that please me, but perhaps no critic. That is, after all, one of the freedoms that this land affords us. The freedom to choose one's own path to fulfillment. For some, that path may be a long and crowded way. For others, a quiet place. But not matter, it's my uncommencement hope for each of you that you will find that path and take it. That is, I think, and I hope your teachers agree, the aim of your liberal education here. To help you gain wisdom to find that path and the courage to take it. In doing that, you will find the wholeness and unity of purpose that are the real meaning of integrity. "My object in life", wrote Robert Frost, "is to unite my avocation and my vocation." As my two eyes make one in sight, congratulations and thank you for letting me come. [applause]