

Commencement Address
W. Georgia State College
Summer of 1984

James Reston on Heroes and Villains

Editor's Note: James Reston, Jr., author, was commencement speaker summer quarter. Reston, 43, was reared in Washington, D.C. and is a philosophy graduate of the University of North Carolina. Reston has authored several books, including To Defend, To Destroy: The Knock At Midnight, The Innocence of Joan Little, and his latest, Our Father Who Art in Hell, about the life and death of Jim Jones. He is co-author of the best-selling book on Watergate, Perfectly Clear.

When Dr. Townsend called me some months ago to ask me to be your commencement speaker, I wondered about his sense of humor . . . and his sense of irony. Why, I asked myself, would a Georgia College want its distinguished graduates to hear the words of an author whose subjects ranged from such dubious characters as Richard Nixon, vietnam war resisters, Joan Little, Jim Jones (hardly, cast of inspirational characters) . . . and worst of all, in that Hall of infamy . . . dare I utter the word here . . . General William Tecumseh Sherman. When Dr. Townsend reached me, I was in rehearsal for my play about Jim Jones. I failed to tell Dr. Townsend, that I had now just completed a book on General Sherman. Now Jim Jones is one thing but General Sherman is quite another! Or is it? Especially in Carrollton, Georgia. My job here is not to send the true sons and daughters of the Confederacy out into the world. Most of them have long since had their chance.

I remember when my Sherman play was done in North Carolina five years ago, the *Greensboro Daily News* said, the latest castor oil to flow from the pen of James Reston, Jr. . . . may be the hardest of all to swallow! Maybe, that's what Dr. Townsend had in mind for you ladies and gentlemen. After these four years of fooling around, graduation marked the time to get serious, and Reston was just the one to do it!

I suspect that for you Rebel flags have more to do with beer blasts and pickup trucks than with history. Robert E. Lee? How many hearts in this audience beat faster at the name? It was only a generation or two ago among white southerners that Lee was the arch hero . . . epitome of a higher Virginia civilization . . . symbol of the perfect father/husband . . . best of Southern ante Bellum culture . . . brilliant military strategist (who never lost a battle except when the politicians like Jefferson Davis meddled) . . . soul of kindness and nobility . . . In short the Marble Man.

No, I doubt that you care very much about all that. On the other hand, General Sherman can be a lot more fun, and he is just as central to Southern mythology as General Lee. A few years ago, a restaurant in Atlanta (Seven Steers) had a cute menu, plugging into the local lore. One of its items was two eggs and Shermanized toast . . . burned to crisp. But then it went out of business. I expect you don't know . . .

only your grandparents may remember this . . . that in 1938, the U.S. issued a three cent commemorative stamp of General Sherman. There was a frightful hub-bub in Milledgeville. One resident was heard to say that he didn't even think Sherman was a fit subject for the history books, much less a commemorative simultaneously.

So you see villains are generally a lot more interesting than heroes. I've always thought so anyway. But . . . here's my point . . . it's important for you to have both. You will need standards of heroism and villainy in the world you enter. For without such a standard in that vacuum, the villains are sure to take over, and the world you're entering is too dangerous for that.

How much should your generation care about the Southern past? Well, there's a difference between caring about it and romanticizing it. Now I have nothing against romance, believe me. But collective romance can be as dangerous as collective despair. The South is to me by far the most interesting section of the country. I am not Southern born, but I have lived most of my adult life in the South, and I would be proud to support anyone who is proud, to be known as Southern (although I never will be). The South is interesting as much for its contradictions as anything else. Historically speaking, it's the only section of the nation that has known defeat, and this should make it more mature . . . but it doesn't always. It's also been the most racist section of our nation, and this should make it all the more attentive now to racial equality but it doesn't always. Villains and heroes, you see. The South has known in its very recent past what it means to be the villain to the nation, and this makes it more interesting now. You should care about that.

So yes, I think you should care about the Southern Past. As professional men and women, you will be proud to be known as Southern businessmen and women, or Southern teachers, or whatever. For if you are Southern in the rich and realistic definition of the word, you will be more interesting than most. But you must know how to distinguish between myth and reality. You should care about Southern history, war and all. You must know when the old Southern mythology is being used as a code for the old, and wicked Southern Politics. You, more than any generation before you, has to be attentive to codes and symbols and hidden motives. Let me see if I can make my point in a different way. Let me run a little test on you. It will be your final pop quiz, and you get to answer it in your mind. Oh, if all pop quizzes could be taken in one's own mind. Tell me if you think the following is BLASPHEMY:

Jefferson Davis, you know,

personally lost the Civil War not in Richmond, but 90 miles from here, in Palmetto. That's right. And it wasn't in 1865, but 1864. After the Fall of Atlanta in September, 1864 . . . battles that were lost by an incompetent general John Belle Hood, who frittered away a strong fighting force in the Atlanta campaign, and who was drugged up most of the time anyway . . . from the pain of having had a leg amputated . . . Anyway, after that disaster, Jefferson Davis slipped into Georgia to try to buck up the spirits of the ragged remnants of Hood's Army, and he came around Sherman's forces to Palmetto. There, he boasted that Sherman would soon experience the fate of Napoleon in Russia . . . be starved out, cut off from his supply lines, and forced to slink out of Georgia with only a body guard. And then . . . and then this is what is astonishing . . . he said to the men of the Confederate Army of Tennessee . . . made up mostly of Tennesseans and Kentuckians . . . now boys, you will soon be treading your native soil.

Right there, he blew it. For Sherman, of course, had his spys. And with that speech, Davis signaled to Sherman that the Confederate battle plan now was to backtrack north and west back up into Tennessee. When Sherman learned that, he concocted the March to Sea, which broke the back of the Confederacy, and thereby, sealed the doom of the institution of Slavery.

Now today, if you are Southern, is it blasphemy to talk that way about the icons and emblems of the Southern past? If you are a white Southerner, is it blasphemy to acknowledge the stupidity of a Confederate general, and the downright foolishness of Jefferson Davis. Of course, it is not. This is part of real history, part of real heritage, as opposed to the historical romance of the Southern past. And to know the real history of the South, is important to you. For it is important to know who the real heroes and who the real villains of past the were.

Conversely, if you are black and Southern, must all that was associated with the Southern history be bound up with wickedness? How important is it really to get angry when the song Dixie is sung? Well, I think it is very important, if the singing is a code for racism. You must get angry, and you must demand that the music stop. But Dixie, remember, was a tune that was composed by a Yankee. And it is a tune that Abraham Lincoln requested be played, when he heard that Lee had surrendered at Appomattox. Lincoln's request was not ironic or cynical or satirical, for he declared that he thought it was one of the best tunes ever written, and it is. The South still is the land of cotton, and that old times are not forgotten . . . well, that can be a good thing for all people, and doesn't

necessarily have to be a code for the old times of slavery.

Likewise, the Confederate flag. When it is waved as a flaunt for white supremacy . . . of course if you are black, or if you are white, you should be angry, and demand it be put away and point to the shame of the past. The Confederate flag as the symbol of racism is still very active in the South. Remember that incident in North Carolina in 1979, when 5 activists were shot down in Greensboro by Klu Klux Klansmen? That incident happened, only three months after the very same activists has stormed a meeting of the Klu Klux Klansmen, where the robed devils were showing BIRTH OF A NATION (one of the greatest films ever made, and one of the most racist), and had burned the Klansmen's Confederate Flag. For television cameras afterwards, an Imperial Wizard held up the charred pieces of the Stars and Bars, and vowed revenge and three months later, five people were dead. This is not ancient history, but contemporary affairs.

Does that mean that you as forward-thinking Southerners, and leaders of the future here, should demand that the Confederate flag henceforth never be on display at a public or private gathering? Should you demand that it be wiped off the Georgia State Flag as a design of disgrace? I don't think so. Symbols are important depending on how they are used, with what motives, for what purpose. When I graduated from college in North Carolina, there was no doubt what the Confederate Flag stood for. In your age, it is more subtle. Ask questions, examine motives.

You see, I am a great believer in generational identity. I'm never sure how to delineate one generation from another. Is it 5 years or 10 years or 25 years between us? Change in values? When I was 22, just graduated from the University of North Carolina, I went to work for Stewart Udall, who was John Kennedy's Secretary of the Interior . . . The Interior Department, as you know, has the responsibility for memorials in the Nation's Capitol. Then as now, there was a rule that there could not be a major statue erected for a figure who has died less than 25 years before the statue was commissioned. It is a good rule. But as I worked for Stewart Udall, I would live to see the rule broken dramatically. For only two months into that job, John Kennedy was assassinated. In the coming year, it seemed as if every new highway, every new hospital, or cultural center was named after Kennedy. A myth was proclaimed on the spot . . . a national romance. Camelot and all that . . .

If all those public facilities had been foreclosed from using the Kennedy

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name until 1988 . . . four years from now when you will be along your way towards your role in the community . . . I wonder if there would be quite so many John F. Kennedy Parkways in America. For one of those great lines of a Kennedy speech, can easily be turned around on the Kennedy generation in the light of history. "Let the word go forth from this time and place that the torch has been passed to a new generation . . ." When that torch was passed in 1961, yes, it gave the country, and particularly it gave the South . . . the glorious civil rights revolution. But it also, soon after, gave the nation Vietnam.

Who, I ask you now, would you name your freeways and hospitals and community centers after? If not Kennedy, who? Jimmy Carter . . . or Waylon Jennings? Michael Jackson . . . or Robert E. Lee? Darth Vader or Steve Barkowski? Burt Lance . . . or Deep Throat? Who your heroes are . . . is important. Who your villains are . . . is important. Because they indicate what is important to you. They indicate what moves you, what inspires you beyond your own personal needs. And they indicate the standards of leadership that you might inspire in yourself. When Gerald Ford moved the portraits of Abraham Lincoln and Harry Truman into his Cabinet room, as he assumed the Presidency was important . . . (The only problem was that the two figures were contradictory). When Richard Nixon receded to the Lincoln Sitting Room to pray and weep on the day before he resigned, that was important . . . (but he might have repaired to the room a good bit sooner for meditation.)

My generation was the Vietnam generation. It was instilled with a great skepticism about power. For we came to appreciate who suffers most in war, at last, war in the old sense, which Americans (except Southerners) have always fought away from their native land. We came to distrust the motivations of politicians, and even to assume the most corrupt motives in the midst of noble rhetoric. We were always on the lookout for the seed of corruption. We came to know a President of our great land as a crook. So, we became fixed upon villains rather than heroes. We know how to spot a phony . . . but we have difficulty in following good men or women. We have difficulty following, period.

I do not state this as a virtue, but as a fact. The Vietnam generation thought of itself as victims, not leaders. It separated itself from the American dream, because it saw dreams twisted into nightmares. For that reason, now at the natural time when my generation would be assuming power, it is being passed over for power. Because the bulk and the best of my generation failed to answer the call when the issue of Vietnam was drawn . . . the call both for resistance against Vietnam or to

participate in the war itself. 16 million out of the eligible 24 million young men between the years of 1964-1973 never served in the armed forces. Thus, the Vietnam generation, when it comes to assuming leadership now, is burdened by embarrassments. It should not be embarrassing to say, I was on the streets of Chicago, protesting the immorality and the racism of Vietnam in 1968 . . . but it is. It should not be embarrassing to say: I was with the American Division that swept the Iron Triangle of Vietnam, but until very recently, it was embarrassing to say that.

Indeed, it was the central agony of the Vietnam generation that no matter what the young person did in relation to the Vietnam endeavor: resisted, fought, or ignored the unpleasantness altogether, has consequences for later life.

What has all this to do with you? Several things:

I am not talking about ancient history, but the very recent past. If in historical terms, the days in the South when there were separate bathrooms and separate eating places is not so long ago, it was also not long ago that young men and women like you were dying—300 a week—in a God Forsaken jungle. You need to remember that for you could be the candidates for the same thing. You need to have a sense of who the villains were who dragged us into that Vietnam conflict, and kept the country there for the longest and most costly American war. The lessons of Vietnam are important to you personally. Old times should not be forgotten. Memory. That's what the South is supposed to cherish more than the rest of the nation. But where does memory begin? It begins with you. Right here. Today. Once, when memory was more mythology than actual historical sense, that could be a vice . . . Today, in 1984, to have a memory is more of a virtue than a vice. It gives a sense of what is important. Of what endures. Of what lasts.

For your generation, that is more difficult than ever before. You enter a world of images and image makers, of staging and packaging, of high-powered, and low-powered, and hidden powered salesmen. That creates a world of mirrors and illusions. Politicians use teleprompters to look natural and to look authentic. In such a world it becomes harder and harder to judge what is real, what is authentic, what is honest.

So slick, so attractive can be these images, almost narcotic, it is easy to get fooled. It is becoming increasingly possible—to turn Abraham Lincoln on his head—to fool all of the people all of the time.

No one likes to play the fool, even if the entire nation is a jolly company of fools, and you must hang on to skepticism, hang on for dear life, at

commercial messages, political messages, religious messages. And while you hand onto your skepticism, you must at the same time, avoid the lot of the Vietnam Generation: The mire of cynicism, and bitterness and alienation.

Whatever concerns about your world and your country and your region that you may have developed in the past four years of college have probably shaped your sensibility for the remainder of your life. That for me is a personal observation. As a writer, I have been sifting the experiences and the passions of my early twenties . . . for the last twenty years. My preoccupation with the passions of my early manhood may make me irrelevant someday . . . but I don't think so. I know what I believe in. At this exquisite moment of transition that you now face . . . the transition to the world of personal responsibility . . . you would do well to ask yourself now, what do I believe in? That is a broad question, far broader than political belief or religious belief. It has to do with your own possibilities. It has to do with what you aspire to.

I happen to believe that one should ~~live on the great heights~~ and risk the deep valleys of life. But I don't argue that my attitudes should be yours. I do submit, however, that on the national scene what Vietnam was to my generation, the nuclear predicament is to yours. If Vietnam was a moral issue . . . and I am almost sure it was . . . the nuclear problem is far more deeply so, for it has to do with ultimate moral question, the survival of the human race.

The excitement of the world that you are now entering lies in its possibility. I go from here to Cape Canaveral to watch the shuttle launch three days from now. The country has become bored with space flight, we are told. It's all become routine. Routine? That shuttle has had 11 flights . . . and we are bored . . . less than the number that a new commercial airliner would receive in its first week . . . long, long before it was declared fit and safe for carrying passengers. Next year, or two from that shuttle, a satellite will launch a space telescope on earth. It will enable us to see beyond our galaxy. How exciting that is! Another satellite is scheduled to probe Jupiter. Yet another is to fly around Mars and then around the far side of the Sun. Thus, for you, for your generation, a thousand years of human knowledge is going to be compressed into one year. That is astonishing. It is inspiring. It is wonderful.

The shuttle has become a symbol. A symbol of pride . . . A symbol of scientific achievement. A noble symbol. But even it depends on how it is used . . . and by whom . . . and for what purpose. In that sense, it is like the Confederate Flag as a symbol. For just as the space shuttle can be used to probe Jupiter, it can be used and will very shortly be used

for star wars research. Very soon, missions will be launched to go around the far side of the sun, not to see what is there, but to see if you can deliver a nuclear weapon by that circuitous route. Your generation when it comes to power will have to decide if such research is necessary.

Thus, you are not only entering a world, but a galaxy. That world and that galaxy have infinite possibility, and they are threatened as never before. Curiously, that is not news. The nuclear issue has been around for nearly forty years. The military use of space has been around since Sputnik. The news is: that just now, as you leave college, the full scope of our global and galactic situation is coming to be realized. There is a new global awareness; there is a new cosmic awareness that has burst upon us. This is healthy, important, necessary, so much more healthy than the deep sleep of the last twenty years.

I was in Germany recently doing an Equire Magazine project on the youth of Germany. I was struck by what I was told there. The young talked about understanding a reality of nuclear confrontation, about knowing a reality in some total sense, as a result of the efforts to stop the development of Cruise and Pershing missiles in the last four years. They suddenly had come to know this reality totally, in some total sense, whereas before they knew the danger only intellectually; remotely. This is an important distinction. You know that Atlanta, with its defense and space industries, and Fort Benning are targets for nuclear destruction . . . You have read about that in your newspaper. BUT DO YOU KNOW IT IN ANY TOTAL SENSE? What would it take for you to understand that IN A TOTAL SENSE, the true reality of it? In Germany, it took a deadline. The Allies said they were going to deploy the missiles on such and such a date, if the Russians did not negotiate seriously. It also took the situation, where a person could nearly walk down his country lane and see where nuclear missiles are deployed. For Germans, to know totally the danger they faced, meant a deadline, and an actual sighting of the missile sites.

What could possibly be the equivalent of that experience for you? Our missiles all are generally deployed somewhere in North Dakota or Utah.

My point is that the central danger to your generation is far more abstract than it was for me, when we emerged from these muddy trenches of academe. For it is easy to ignore what you can not see. And it is hard to imagine something so catastrophic as nuclear war, when it has never happened before.

Imagination, in a sense, is the burden of your generation. You must imagine the worst . . . BEFORE the fact. You must contend with Hiroshima before