INDUCTION ADDRESS

PRESIDENT JOHN E. SAWYER

Trustees and Faculty, Honored Guests, Alumni, Parents,
Friends, and Students of Williams:

It is first my privilege to bid you welcome to Williams College and to express the hope that we may see more of you again on more leisurely occasions.

I next should like to thank those who have borne greetings as delegates and spokesmen. While part of my mind knows that they should not be held accountable for exaggerated kindnesses of today, still they have brought encouragement — and humor — in phrases to be stored away for the bleaker times which will come as surely as New England's winter.

But you have a right to expect from me on this occasion something more than formal acceptance of the sobering symbols of an office in which I succeed an old friend, a gifted historian, a vigorous and distinguished President, and a notable American.

I

It is customary for the new incumbent to step forward at this point and hit as long an educational ball as verbal flight will allow — and that can be a considerable distance. The difficulty about that procedure is that the farther it goes, the less likely it is ever to be seen again. And further, that the new man is new. While it has been my good fortune to have spent the fifteen years since wartime in academic life divided almost equally between Harvard and Yale — two other creditable New England institutions for which my attachments run deep — still there is much that the new man does not yet know about the institution into which he is presently moving. There is still more he does not know about the exact design that will prove most fruitful for its future.

Hence today I would rather not attempt to build too airy or too precise castles in the sky. I would rather limit myself to indicating the base from which I depart, and from this premise, the direction of my present thoughts about where this kind of College seems to fit in the larger firmament of American higher education. I say "present thoughts" for any historian appreciating the power of change in human events prefers to leave some room in which to move.

The base from which I begin is the field of knowledge in which I have been reading, writing, teaching — and sometimes also thinking — during a fair part of the past fifteen years. It is the calling of an economic historian whose task is to press the questions of why and how the western world has moved within the past thousand years from localized, land-based, highly traditionalized patterns of economic and social organization to the booming, industrial bigness that surrounds us today.

This record stands as a remarkable epic by any standard. Measured against the duration of human life on this planet, it is still more remarkable when we realize that its massive impact on the daily life of most human beings began only a century and a half ago; and that its major entry into the experience or expectations of the southern and eastern halves of the globe has come only within our own life-time.

Within this larger epic the United States alone of the major nations has lived its life in the era of continuously expanding economic horizons which have been developing since the late eighteenth century. It alone has had an existence concurrent with the growth of modern economic possibilities, a national life lived largely within free institutions and an intellectual framework of the rational, liberal, optimistic assumptions inherited from the Enlightenment.

With its selective transfer of men and ideas from abroad, its youth, its ease, its innocence, its fortunate institutions, America has pursued the advantages offered by a favorable ratio of labor to resources to realize an unprecedented course of growth. Americans have pursued material goals not simply with the energy and initiative that the world knows, but with something that is often missed by foreign observers—a persisting strain of accompanying idealism, a faith that all the striving for abundance would produce not just a richer world but a *better* one as well.

Most of this happened in America within a period of time no longer than two overlapping life-spans. Of this almost incredible fact the late Henry L. Stimson has reminded us in the Introduction to his autobiography, *On Active Service in Peace and War*. In that impressive book he recalls childhood conversations in which his great-grandmother told of her own early talks with George Washington. Their two lives thus bridged American history from the founding of this nation to the present.

The pace and cumulative flow of this development, and the optimistic expectations that it fostered did little to equip Americans for the triple shocks that the mid-century has administered: the shock of a deep and lasting depression when the economy did not readily right itself even over a protracted period; the shock of a catastrophic war coming so soon after the War to End Wars and leaving in fragments the nation-state system and the limits of military power on which nineteenth century order had been built. Finally, most subtly, perhaps most pervasively, the disturbing discovery in our own time that the coming of abundance has not solved major problems bearing in upon us. Though we have not yet fully recognized this as a nation, as individuals we deeply know that even for a *People of Plenty*, to borrow David Potter's title, the problems of man and society in this spinning universe have become more acute rather than less as our productivity has increased.

The last of these shocks, though less visible and as yet less fully absorbed, may be the most profound of all, for it reflects changes that comprehend all others. For the first time since life emerged from the primeval ooze, a favored part of the biological kingdom need no longer have as its primary concern gaining enough food and shelter to reproduce its kind. This is a change without parallel in the economic history of the species. Instead, in endowed lands such as ours, men face the immeasurably more

difficult task of finding how to use and control the new potentials at their disposal, how to order life within and among ourselves so that the enterprise may continue on its course under conditions of decency, dignity and, in the deepest sense, humanity.

II

If we assess this pace of change in the perspective of man's years afoot, or even the more recent millenia in which he has for the most part lived close to nature in relatively routinized forms and faiths transmitted by custom through the generations, the wonder is not that we are sometimes dizzy but that we have managed to stand at all.

Yet while we *can* still stand and see about us, we must brace for an acceleration of change and a magnitude and newness of problems to come that—as C. P. Snow stated from this platform last May—we must expect will exceed anything heretofore experienced. In speaking thus we naturally think first of the looming problems in the foreground: preventing the reduction of this world to a cinder or of life to the lowest common denominator of a vulgarized culture on a brutalized earth. But beyond and beneath these immediacies abide less visible problems inherent in the trend-lines of the civilization. With these too the coming generation is going to have to learn to cope.

While it struggles to contain and master the limitless powers of modern science and to weather internal and external pressures already in motion, it must find the further resources of intellect, imagination, wisdom and character to live in and make liveable a world that is shifting its gears in more sectors than we yet recognize, yet that is shifting gears most unevenly: a world that may be on the verge of synthesizing living tissue, yet already threatens to smother itself with over-population; a world in which computational techniques will totally transform what can be done with data, yet that floods its channels of communication with matter of which we have little reason to be proud; a world already projecting billion dollar machines and inter-planetary flight, but that has yet to achieve any major breakthrough in the problems of international relations on this single earth or the mounting problems of living within its sprawling urban ganglia; a world in which the deeper determinants of human behavior are only beginning to be mapped, yet whose mapping poses problems of manipulation and control only too vividly forecast in Huxley's *Brave New World* or George Orwell's *1984*. These kinds of transcendent change underlie many of the stresses now and ahead. They confront this generation and the next with the task of making institutions and ideals to which we are deeply attached operative under con-ditions no more like those in which they historically arose than a nuclear submarine resembles a birch bark canoe.

My own class entered college in 1935 in the late years of the great depression while Europe and Asia were visibly moving toward war. Most of us then served three, four or five years in the services, and have since found the world not untroubled. Yet I think we would be in error not to predict that the easy years for America are

now over; the hard ones, the most profoundly shaking ones, the ones that will put the greatest pressures upon our beliefs, ideals, institutions, intelligence, courage, and stamina have only begun. Individual lives have faced the full range of human difficulties, but as a nation we are only now beginning to sense how exceptionally favored the collective American experience has been and how serious and persisting are the problems beyond abundance. That is the sea-change now upon us. That is the root source of much of the current anxious searching about national purpose.

III

If this, then, is where we stand in history, it defines the challenge to which higher education must try to provide a creative response.

Whether we will have the vision, the verve, the leadership, the financial means, the private and public backing to meet it remains to be seen. Here too we cannot let easy optimism obscure realities. As a society we are presently devoting to higher education less than one percent of our gross national product. This is a pattern of resource allocation we cannot afford to continue. Nor need I take time to list again here how much more we spend on less compelling wants.

In terms of human capital, we have been reinvesting in the central structure of higher education less than five percent of each year's college graduates, compared with multiples of that figure in some other countries. These are the people who will teach the next generation. If continued, this evident differential in the crude numbers going into advanced instruction can have far more impact on the future than the much discussed differences in current rates of economic growth. Apart from anything outside our shores, however, the rising number seeking a college education at home—a total we now know is expected to double by the 1970's—provides its own imperative. An increase in the scope and resources of the effort needs little argument.

But what of its nature and quality? Let me speak of these separately. Before on-rushing numbers we can put to constructive use the diversity of the historical forms of higher education that have developed in America and hence take heart in the opportunities they offer to varied talents and interests. In this array the independent first-class four year liberal arts colleges stand as a unique American creation without direct British or Continental counterpart. President Griswold has brilliantly sketched their special place in our educational scene. It is to their corresponding responsibilities that I would now speak.

These have been highlighted within a fortnight by the Ford Foundation's grants to certain liberal arts colleges. In announcing what we all hope is only the first of a continuing series of such grants, Mr. Heald said, "The Special Program in Education is being extended to liberal arts colleges because of the importance of the liberal arts — the humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences — in cultivating the thoughtful leadership and independent opinion essential in a free society... [Four-year liberal arts colleges are being helped] because the role of these colleges is vital to higher education and their needs are critical."

And rightly so. For the trend-lines of this civilization that we have reviewed together as economic historians converge on this central fact: that education today must equip young men and women for leadership and for living under conditions of "deliberate tentativeness" as to their future (the phrase is taken from Eric Homburger Erikson).

Young men now entering college, if given their biblical life span—and who knows what more or less than three score and ten?—will be carrying responsibilities well into the 21st century of the Christian era. No one can pretend to more than a guess at what they will then be called upon to comprehend. This much we do know: that no training in fixed techniques, no finite knowledge now at hand, no rigid formula they might be given can solve problems whose shape we cannot yet define. Nor have they time to waste in pursuit of transitory expedients, the ephemeral, the shallow or the merely popular.

The most versatile, the most durable, in an ultimate sense the most practical knowledge and intellectual resources which they can now be offered are those impractical arts and sciences around which a liberal arts education has long centered: the capacity to see and feel, to grasp, respond and act over a widening arc of experience; the disposition and ability to think, to question, to use knowledge to order an ever-extending range of reality; the elasticity to grow, to perceive more widely and more deeply, and perhaps to create; the understanding to decide where to stand and the will and tenacity to do so; the wit and wisdom, the humanity and the humor to try to see oneself, one's society and one's world with open eyes, to live a life usefully, to help things in which one believes on their way. This is not the whole of a liberal arts education, but as I understand it, this range of goals is close to its core.

To all this there is no easy road. It is the remarkable resiliency of the fundamental liberal arts and sciences in enabling men over a long period of time to master changing worlds that so powerfully commends them to us anew right now. And this means the basic central subjects, not fragments or fringes. If I have stressed matters of public life that relate most closely to history and the social sciences it is only the cobbler starting from if not sticking to his last. The parallel importance of sustaining and strengthening the natural sciences hardly needs underlining in a world that is each day more visibly "penetrated through and through by science." (Bronowski). There is perhaps more danger that we might lose sight of the primacy of the humanities in the private growth of human beings, in bringing guidance and vitality to the culture, in giving men a scale, a score, a vision to live by. It is no accident that these three areas form the major divisions of virtually all liberal arts curricula.

On just how different fields should be taught there is happily no single answer. I have watched enough curricular reforms over enough years to anticipate no educational panaceas; nor are we likely to find wisdom by chasing the fleeting fads that course through the academic grove. There are better and worse curricula, and hence the search is worth the candle; for the better ones provide more opportunities to combine sound learning, imaginative teaching, important reading, and hard work.

These, along with increasing latitude for the gifted student, remain the fundamentals on which to build.

The time has clearly come, however, for the traditional liberal arts college to investigate what new areas of study should wisely be added to the basic curriculum, and how old ones might best be regrouped to avoid excessive fragmentation or superficiality. We can no longer pretend that all the history that really matters centers on western civilization, or that language instruction can rest with the Indo-European. The wider world is now with us for the duration and we must move to meet it.

More urgent still is the need to survey the whole burgeoning business now loosely called "research". At its best it produces the noblest fruit of our vineyard—a genuine addition to the truth we seek. But let us as a profession be more candid with ourselves and with each other about the avalanche of wordage and factitious methodology whose scholarly worth and final weight is close to zero. If we cannot better screen for quality the mounting output that multiplying academic apparatus engenders, we will be so inundated by mediocrity that, as another has said, we may find a Gresham's law invading scholarship as well. Scholarship deserves better of us.

It is right here that I think the strong liberal arts college faculty such as this can make a most important contribution. Somewhat removed from the more frantic centers of output, less harried by exploding numbers of graduate students who must get topics today and pages in print tomorrow, those faculty members so endowed and inclined have an opportunity to sift and sort and reflect and write on what I hope is a less hectic and perhaps more thoughtful plane. Not all, naturally, will have such gifts but it is worth noting that the kinds of problems on which the West is likely to founder—the kinds we discussed earlier—can for the most part be at least as well analyzed and evaluated at an institution like this as at a large urban university.

Our civilization is not going to collapse for lack of technical competence or specialists. Its crying intellectual need is for men who can not only create but comprehend and relate what expertise produces to the main streams of knowledge; men who can bridge the widening gaps in the culture. The natural meeting place of well trained scholars from different fields that the good liberal arts college provides can, at its best, offer fertile ground for such linkages. In Whitehead's phrase we need "fresh combinations" far more acutely than mere poundage of meretricious publication.

IV

If such are main directions of the effort what of its quality, and for whom? Just as we *can* take heart in the diversity of our historical forms of higher education and in the opportunities thus offered, we *must* as a people recognize the self-evident fact that not all young men and women are equally suited or dedicated to the requirements of a first-class four-year college or university. If we are to maintain anything like the quality we need at the top of our educational system, we must accept and respect valid limitations on entry as a necessary condition of producing the excellence required by the most demanding tasks ahead.

Quality, however, is not a single or simple thing, and the effort to appraise the promise of long-run growth of a person at age 16 or 17 will make humble anyone who soberly undertakes it. There *is* no certain way. In an effort to be sure that an entering student can profit from the program offered, we have to rely heavily upon past performance and recommendations from the schools and to a lesser extent upon tests designed to measure certain kinds of skills and abilities. We are painfully aware of the inadequacies of these indices.

We also know that human beings grow at very different rates and in surges and directions not uniform at any given age. We know also that there are deeper qualities in young men that can be of controlling importance in what they bring to and receive from the college years and in the kind of people they will become—qualities which prevailing testing and grading systems simply do not measure.

Although policies of admissions presently in force at leading colleges and universities are more careful and humane than the public at large may realize, the radical increase of numbers has brought pressures that disturb sound educational judgment. It has produced tensions down through the grade system that often intrude on the full natural growth of the human potential. It has led colleges, schools and parents to actions we know are wrong.

While constructive tightening of standards was long overdue in the American school system, we probably now must watch the swing under which imperfect numerical scoring systems tied to uniform examinations at a fixed age might exclude from first-line colleges and universities an important part of the potential diverse leadership of a coming generation. Anyone watching the tensions build up, in some instances destructively, cannot avoid reflecting on the leisurely education of Jefferson's era, or the self-education of a Franklin or Lincoln; or more recently the case of Winston Churchill or a remark of Alfred North Whitehead in an interview on his 80th birthday. When then asked to what educational experience he attributed his extraordinary intellectual life, as a mathematician in England till approaching retirement and then anew for twenty years as a philosopher in this country, Whitehead paused a minute and then replied: Perhaps the fact that I never went to school until I was thirteen. This personal experience may have lent particular fervor to his campaign against what he called the "uniform external examination [which]...kills the best part of culture."

Alongside the familiar case of the "late-bloomer" whose strengths emerge slowly, colleges have also become aware of the phenomenon of the "early fader", the student who readily assembled what we might call "conformity A's" pleasing teachers all through school, but who lacks the depth, the range, the inner curiosity or purpose to sustain the effort.

How much can be done about all these procedures with large numbers of applicants remains to be seen. As a modest contribution on a small scale—partly because we are a "main-line" institution rather than primarily an experimental school—I hope we may find a foundation interested in helping us conduct an experiment here in which

we would admit each year a designated fraction of the entering class—perhaps ten percent—who might not ordinarily have been admitted on prevailing formal criteria. I probably cannot too quickly make clear that this should *not* be read as an invitation to school principals or headmasters to unload a weaker candidate or case behind whom lies inordinate family pressure. On the contrary it is the candidate of exceptional strength that we would be seeking, but with an eye to strength that might not as yet be wholly organized or evenly distributed in a paper record of uniform excellence. Sometimes the most gifted or most deeply reflective balk first at the treadmill of graded requirements.

Let me also be sure that there is no implied neglect of present academic excellence. In making this proposal I am speaking against a background in which a third of our recent freshman classes have entered either as valedictorians or from the first five of their class; and in which more than three-quarters graduated within the top fifth. Such men will always be at the forefront of each class. But in this proposal we would also be seeking the individual with a flair, a *forte*, a strength of character that would enrich the student population and the College; the individual of whom one can sometimes say with conviction, "*there* is going to be an interesting person;" the young man whose promise of leadership or notable contribution to diverse fields has stirred the respect and enthusiasm of someone whose judgment we have learned to trust. We will be seeking excellence but in more forms than one.

Further—and here foundation assistance would be needed—we would like to make a careful study of such individuals (who naturally would remain unidentified among their peers), keeping a private record of why we took them in and of their performance here at college and long after. We would also plan to keep a parallel record of those on whose recommendation we acted, hoping thus to build up over time bases on which subsequent judgments could be formed. Out of these records we would eventually seek some guide-lines for further supplementing the formal criteria of admissions decisions if experience justified the initial program. This is not a radical departure and it would not move the universe. I hope it might become a useful pilot light on a major problem before us all.

V

As you have detected, my remarks have been moving closer and closer to home. I have tried thus far to avoid too localized a frame of reference, but let me conclude with a few brief further thoughts relating to this College.

Apart from the admissions experiment proposed above, we will be bringing under review various of the general procedures of governance of the College. Steps are already underway to increase the natural meal-time opportunities for faculty-student conversation—an ancient art worth cultivating. The Board of Trustees has also established a small, serious committee of review to make such studies and recommendations on various fraternity questions not unknown on neighboring campuses as it believes will best serve the long-run interests of the College in its central purpose.

A Committee of a dozen trustees, alumni, faculty and students representing all decades from 1911 to 1962, under a devoted and distinguished Chairman and with a membership that will command the respect of Williams men, has begun deliberations and hearings which will be continued as it judges best throughout the year.

On the academic front we will be examining our strengths and weaknesses and deciding how best to move where new talents or departures seem needed. In an effort to avoid piecemeal adaptations not well related to other programs, I have set up a Committee on Forward Planning to receive and propose lines of development that seem most promising to us. Its interests will include not simply the College itself, but relationships to other educational institutions nearby, as well as the kind of additions to the community that could best serve or enhance our mutual purposes. The Chapin rare book collection, The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, the Roper Public Opinion Research Center, the Center for Development Economics at Cluett House—all these enlarge and enrich our horizons and relate this College to the world. That has been the Williams tradition for more than a century and a half since the founding here in 1806 of the American foreign missionary movement.

Simply to sustain existing activities under the pressures ahead will require major increases in our endowment resources in the coming decade. This we will seek in the belief that the merits of the endeavor and urgency of the hour provide their own best argument. If the first Trustees and President had the courage to found a College "for the benefit of those unborn" in this frontier valley in 1793, the tasks ahead cannot be left undone. To these tasks those of us here assembled now rededicate this College.