WOMEN, CULTURE, & POLITICS

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Vintage Books
A Division of Random House, Inc.
New York

Imagining the Future

I want to thank you graduating seniors for inviting me on this momentous occasion to share with you some of my own political experiences, and to offer you my ideas on the opportunities and challenges that await you. I must confess, however, that I was quite surprised to learn that you had chosen me to be your commencement speaker. I realize now that I had developed preconceptions about the youth of today based on propagandists notions that the younger generation, by and large, is unconcerned and apolitical—and perhaps more interested in MTV than in anything else. However, unconcerned and apolitical young people obviously would not have invited a woman who is a Communist and activist in radical political struggles to address their graduating class. I definitely owe you an apology.

My generation is remembered for the militant activism of the sixties and early seventies. We had good cause to

—Originally presented as a commencement address to the Berkeley High School graduating class, June 16, 1983.

involve ourselves in those struggles: the southern states were still brutally segregated; Black people risked their lives to exercise their voting rights; there were no Black, Latino, or Asian Studies programs in the universities or the high schools. Ronald Reagan was elected governor of California and was responsible for, among other things, charging me with three capital crimes—murder, kidnapping, and conspiracy—as well as placing me on the FBI's ten most wanted criminals list. Richard Nixon was elected president of the country, and showed his true colors by conducting a bloody war of aggression against the people of Vietnam. He further orchestrated a smaller-scale domestic war of political repression against the Black Panther party and other Black activist organizations.

We had good cause to align ourselves with radical mass movements during that period. We spun dreams of a better world—one without racism, without economic injustices, without war. We imagined a more humane future, but we also risked our very lives to defeat racism and U.S. military aggression against Southeast Asia.

Now, it is your turn to imagine a more humane future—a future of justice, equality, and peace. And if you wish to fulfill your dreams, which remain the dreams of my generation as well, you must also stand up and speak out against war, against joblessness, and against racism.

Your generation is growing to maturity during a time of great danger—danger that is exemplified by U.S. aggression in El Salvador and Nicaragua and U.S. collusion with South Africa's apartheid government. The young men graduating in this class are among those who would be drafted in the event of a military mobilization aimed at any one of those countries.

But there is an even greater danger. The United States now possesses approximately one thousand nuclear warheads, which are literally capable of consuming the entire world in atomic flames. This is bad enough as it is—but think about the man whose finger is on the nuclear trigger. You are not old enough to remember Ronald Reagan during his heyday in Hollywood. Those were the days of *Bedtime for Bonzo* (his chimpanzee co-star); those were his Death Valley days. Now many of us fear that Reagan might play with an MX missile as he once played with Bonzo—or that he might decide one day to lead us all back to Death Valley.

Yesterday's paper contained an ironic photograph of your president sitting in front of a class of high-school seniors. Perhaps he needs to take a seat among them instead of sitting in front of them. In any event, it seems to me that some of you graduating seniors would probably be far more capable of running this country than the man who is currently pretending to do so. I seriously doubt whether any of you would be so quick to lead the entire world in the direction of global nuclear destruction.

Many of the young men graduating this afternoon will soon be—if they haven't already been—called upon to register for the draft. The draft-registration law is three years old, and it has become a nightmare for hundreds of thousands of young people like yourselves. Over seven hundred thousand of them have, at the risk of imprisonment, already refused to comply with the draft law. Attempts have even been made by the federal government to railroad students into registering by threatening to cut off their financial aid.

In the lyrics of your theme song, John Lennon says, "Imagine all the people living together in peace." But we must be more specific: "Imagine no MX missiles, no cruise

missiles, no Pershing II missiles." We must also do more than imagine. We must march, protest, petition, and pursue whatever other avenues of collective resistance will guarantee that one day all people will live together in total peace, free of the threat of nuclear destruction. Today's youth is tomorrow's hope. It is therefore incumbent upon all of you to work so that you and future generations can "be all that you can be"—but certainly not in the army, navy, air force, or marines.

> Imagine no possession
> I wonder if you can
> No need for greed or hunger
> or brotherhood of man.

Today, of course, the world does not really belong to its inhabitants. There are those—a minute segment of the population—who have usurped most of the wealth in the capitalist world and there are others—the vast majority—who have comparatively little. Many in this majority don't even have enough to survive. Entire families are walking the streets today with no homes, no jobs, no guarantee that they will have food for their next meal.

Joblessness is a special problem for young people, particularly young Black people and others from racially oppressed communities. It is a problem for young women, especially young women of color. How many of you have ever imagined that after graduation there would be a well-paying, creative job awaiting you—or that a scholarship might enable you to attend college? Quite a few of you, no doubt. But you are dealing with a government that cares nothing about its young people and their future. The Reagan

administration is the most brutally antiyouth administration in the entire history of our country. There have been massive cuts in most of the programs that were of any benefit to the young—job training, summer-job programs, health, education, counseling, and recreational programs. The funds for these programs have been transferred to the military. Right here in Berkeley, a Youth Employment Program was established by your current mayor, the Honorable Gus Newport, which united the school district, the private sector, and city government. But Reagan's interference has caused the program to dwindle to a mere shadow of what it was before.

Reagan's preposterous solution to the problem of youth unemployment is the subminimum wage or the so-called "summer wage." Originally, he had proposed a $1.57 minimum wage for all teenagers. Who would want to work for what amounts to slave wages? He later modified it to a $2.50 minimum wage for summer work. Think of the millions of dollars companies like McDonald's might make under such conditions. They are already thriving on cheap teenage labor. Young people should not only earn the minimum wage, the minimum wage itself ought to be doubled! Moreover, an immediate training program should be implemented as a prerequisite for the creation of 5 million jobs for young people in a public-works project to rebuild the nation's cities.

Imagine a shorter work week—thirty hours instead of forty—with no cut in pay. This would create millions of new jobs for young people.

Imagine that all the colleges and universities in the country could be mobilized in order to educate all of our young people for the future—for free.

Imagine that in jobs and in the universities, there would be strong affirmative-action measures so that Black, Asian, Latino, Pacific Island, and Native American youth might finally overcome the stifling legacy of racism. Imagine that young women had exactly the same opportunities as young men.

Imagine, indeed, a world without sexism. Imagine a world without homophobia.

Imagine that we lived in a world without racism.

Imagine that the Ku Klux Klan had already been relegated to the distant past and that we would never again have to worry about the establishment of camps where young white kids learn to hate and brutalize Black people, Mexican-Americans, Native Americans, and Jews.

Imagine that we lived in a world where a five-year-old Black child named Patrick Mason could not be callously murdered by a white police officer in Stanton, California, who later justified his action by saying that the child had a toy gun in his hands. Imagine that we lived in a country where a young Chinese American named Vincent Chin could not be beaten to death with a baseball bat by two unemployed autoworkers who mistook him for Japanese and decided to vent their anger about Japanese automobile imports by killing "one of them."

Imagine that we lived in a world where Mexicans, Central Americans, and Haitians without immigration papers would not be rounded up like cattle and incarcerated in concentration camps, only to be shipped back to their own countries, where they face abject poverty and brutal political repression.

Imagine that we lived in a world where a young Black

activist named Eddie Carthan, duly elected first Black mayor of Tchula, Mississippi, could not be framed on serious felony charges and sentenced to many years in prison because he wished to improve the conditions of the poor in his town.

Imagine that we lived in a world where physically and mentally disabled youth would not be subjected to devastating routine discrimination.

Imagine that we lived in a world without capital punishment. Today, approximately twelve hundred people languish in death-row cells in the prisons across this land; some of them were mere children when they were sentenced to die. Almost half of them are people of color.

But, my young friends—my young sisters and brothers—we must do more than engage in such flights of imagination. All of us, the young and the old alike, women as well as men, must stand up, speak out, and fight for a better world.

We must not allow another Vietnam to explode in El Salvador. We must prevent the subversion of the revolutions in Nicaragua and Grenada. It is up to you to say, "Hell, no, we won't go . . . hell, no, we won't register for anything except to vote Ronald Reagan out of office . . . hell, yes, we will support Ron Dellums in Congress and Gus Newport, the progressive mayor of our city who has taken militant stands for free, integrated education and jobs for all youth."

And we must say—as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said twenty years ago, "I have a dream." Your generation was not yet born when Dr. King led the earthshaking march on Washington in 1963, but you hold in *your* hands the power to lead this country in a direction that will reflect

what you are able to imagine now in your hearts and minds.

Finally, my young friends, remember that you must not only imagine and dream about your future goals—and, indeed, the future of the world—but you must also stand up, unite, and fight for peace, jobs, equality, and freedom!