

Arnold C. Matte, "The Fifth Column"
Bucknell University Baccalaureate Address,
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THE FIFTH COLUMN

by

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Members of the Class of 1940; you have had to listen to me many times during the past four years, since that September evening in 1936 when I first faced you in the Vaughan Literature Auditorium. You were the first freshman class I welcomed and I can still recall your vibrant, eager, almost electric expectancy as you poised that evening on the threshold of your college experiences. Now this morning we approach the parting of the ways. A perfect flood of ideas wells up within me on this occasion, things that I might say at this moment of parting. Most of them I must leave unsaid, for the time is short. The next few moments seem very sacred to me and I shall choose my thoughts and my words most carefully. You may be sure that what I shall say to you now will be said in the full consciousness that this is my last opportunity to make any contribution to your Bucknell education.

You entered Bucknell at a time when you and we believed that this generation of civilized mankind would live together in peace and decency and that you could devote yourselves to the arts of peace. Now, as you leave, you find yourselves in a world of awful war.

I shall not harrow your emotions by describing this shameful tragedy which the greed of a relatively few men has brought crashing down on the heads of hundreds of millions of men and women who wanted to live in peace and brotherhood. We can only say with Caesar as he stood on a battlefield where 80,000 dead lay, after his battle with Pompey. Caesar had not wanted this battle but had been forced to it by Pompey. "Alas," said Caesar as he surveyed the awful shambles "he would have it so."

Certain men, whose coarseness of spirit we simply cannot comprehend, "would have it so" with our bright world. We must face it as it is, and rededicate our whole strength and ardor to making it a better world in our day. It is not the first time in the history of the race that brave men and women have had to face the collapse of their dreams. Let us repeat those magnificent words uttered by Horace centuries ago "Though the great world be overthrown, let us still be undismayed".

Robert Browning sang of the same eternal hope and faith in these words:

"If I stoop
Into a dark tremendous sea of cloud,
It is but for a time; I press God's lamp
Close to my breast; its splendor soon or late
Will pierce the gloom; I shall emerge some day."

As I come to these final words to you, I choose to speak to you of a great, strong, eternal inner strength which will enable you to withstand and prevail. I have called this message "The Fifth Column" because the term has come to signify a mysterious weakness and treachery from within.

The term first came into use three years ago when General Franco was marching on Madrid. He is reported to have said, "My army consists of four columns marching upon the city from four directions, and a fifth column of sympathy and internal weakness which will betray and crumple the city from within".

What has the Fifth Column to do with you and with what I want to say to you? Simply this. There is a Fifth Column which can betray an individual just as surely as there is one which can betray a nation. The individual's Fifth Column is his lack of a great and eternal faith, his cynicism toward moral issues, his confusion regarding everlasting values, his moral and spiritual flabbiness.

It is no picnic or circus that lies ahead of us. Neither is there any reason for panic or fright. It is to be one of the most challenging eras in the

history of the human race. All of us are beginning to comprehend this dimly, "as through a glass darkly", and are beginning to take inventory of our spiritual resources for this titanic struggle ahead. It is to be an elemental contest in the long run, an endurance test which, after machines have done their horrible worst, will be decided in the end by the sheer strength of moral character, unselfish courage, and of an abiding and sublime faith in life's noblest values.

In this time of inventory and testing, our people are yearning and reaching and hungering for these basic virtues. All over the land, men and women, one by one, are tearing away the shams, rejecting falsehoods, casting aside the tinsel and crying in their souls, "I asked for bread and you gave me a stone". We are trying to destroy this fifth column of inner weakness before it destroys us.

During all our four years together my chief concern about you has been at this point, because I am well acquainted with the world which you are now entering and know all too well the weaknesses and cynicisms that are sapping the strength and thwarting the lives of millions who are living without strong faith and high idealism. I have seen cynicism weaken and almost destroy the past two generations of American youth. I have seen cynicism and cruel faithlessness utterly destroy the youth of two great nations. I have tried to save you from this cynicism and flabbiness and failure by upholding before you, as strongly as I knew how, high idealism and an unshakable faith in a better world.

During your lifetime you have been subjected to a bombardment of bitter cynicism which utterly befuddled many youths of your generation. Some of our most brilliant novelists of the present day have made cynicism their profession, a highly paid vocation of bitter words and half truths and scornful judgments. For pay they have sold a whole generation of youth down the river into a slavery of bitterness, cynicism and confusion.

Now, under the shock of today's tragedies, this shallow mood is challenged and many of the bright young scoffers are changing their tune.

One of them, now the honored Librarian of Congress, recently made public confession of the cynical tricks they had played on the lives of your generation of youth in these words: "The post-war writers, of whom I was one, who educated a generation to suspect the tags, the slogans and even the words, left that generation defenceless before an aggressor whose whole strength consists in destroying respect for law, respect for morality, respect for the Word".

Many of the nation's teachers joined in this cult of cynicism also. Their original purpose was probably a sound educational one--to break down the smug satisfaction most young students have in a very little knowledge, to destroy the petty dogmatism of ignorance and to make an honest doubt the cornerstone of a wider knowledge. But too many of our teachers in America in recent years, not at Bucknell, I am proud to say, have used all of their zeal in tearing down immature faiths and have shown no zeal or capacity to inspire their students to reconstruct a mature and genuine faith in those great values which have been proved over and over again in the past ten thousand years of the race's quest for truth and stability.

Dorothy Thompson has recently written, "Our universities have been given over for years now to a philosophy of historic relativism, under which there are no absolute standards for anything. It takes a very strong human being to live in a world where there is no right or wrong, no God in the sky, no rules that everybody must obey, but where everything is relative. Most people completely lose their bearings in such a universe."

Walter Lippman has added, "This tragic ordeal has come about because men--thought it clever to be cynical, and enlightened to be unbelieving, and sensible to be soft."

You have probably not been aware of it, but my whole purpose in trying to serve Bucknell has been to help you at this point of your greatest need and maximum danger. I have done all I have known how to do as your leader, by word and

by example, to give you faith in life's noblest and eternal values, to save you from the mass betrayal of cynicism, cheapness and softness. Now, at the end, I cannot let you face this world without once more giving you my last solemn testament that there are a few great faiths worthy of your everlasting trust.

First. The first great faith, in which you can believe with all your hearts, is American democracy. Modern cynicism has made it extremely unpopular to express a love for America. One who does it may be called a Babbitt, or a Rotarian or a Hundred Percenter. It has been part of the pattern of our recent superficial living to laugh, in an amused and cultivated manner, at those who profess a love for America. How often have you heard someone say, "Maybe the Russians have something", or, "I guess we need a Mussolini here", or, "I'd like to see Hitler turned loose in New York".

At a recent meeting in Indiana of representatives of over 200 colleges and universities, one college president made this report: "There are plenty of people in the schools of America who believe America is not worth saving".

As for me, if America is not worth saving, if our democratic society is not worthy of our love and devotion, then there is no known society worth saving. What has Communism done for Russia that we should feel anything but abhorrence for it? What has Nazism done for Germany that we should have any feeling except loathing for it? As I look at the tragedies in other lands brought by these weird experiments, I feel toward America as did the man who landed in Baltimore the other day after a year in Germany and fell to his knees and kissed the dirt of this nation.

You members of the Class of 1940 have never seen America at its best. About the time you were born, the real America of long, happy tradition, underwent a change from which it has not yet recovered. It has been a sick America during all your lifetime to date. The pre-world-war America of personal integrity, of social modesty and dignity, of humanitarian zeal, of happy family life, of quiet

enthusiasm for cultural and intellectual values, of simple religious faith, of ambition and confidence in the future--this was the true America which you never knew. One form of illness in the 1920's brought on another form of national illness in the 1930's.

In your twenty years of life you have not yet experienced a well America. Some day you will, I hope and believe. But even with our national illness and our obvious shortcomings, America represents the highest stage of human and social happiness on this planet, worthy of our love and faith and loyalty. America sick is a nobler land than any well nation that I know. Here in our nation lies the very hope of civilization itself. It is sick, to be sure. All-right, let us make it well. Do not let a fifth column of doubt about America betray you into withholding your uttermost devotion to it.

When I came to Bucknell four and a half years ago there were many needs clamoring for action. It was obvious that I would have to ask many friends for many gifts. The very first thing I asked for was an American flag that I could stand on the platform on occasions like this. An alumnus of Bucknell responded to my request and brought this beautiful flag--the finest he could find. It was the first gift to Bucknell under my leadership.

When Old Main was rebuilt, I instructed the architect to provide a place for the flag over the center of Roberts Hall. On the first day we moved into the Roberts Hall, I took an American flag in my hands, climbed the ladder up through the trap door which leads onto the roof, and personally broke out the flag on the halyard, and gave instructions that the flag should fly there every clear day.

I love America.

The second eternal faith which you can embrace with all your hearts is a faith in a living and loving God, creator and father of a moral universe.

"What", you cry, "believe in a living and loving God in this day; Creator

of a moral universe, believe in that, now?" Yes, believe in that now, more firmly and unshakably than ever before. If this present world tragedy can teach us anything at all, it is to put more faith rather than less in the great God of a moral universe. At a time of similar crisis, the prophet in the Old Testament cried out, "Who art thou, that thou shouldst feel afraid of a man, and forget the Lord, thy Maker?"

Perhaps I am not talking about the same kind of God of whom you are thinking. Some are saying, "There just can't be a living God or he would stop this war". Others' idea of God is someone to pray to to stop a headache. Still others plead to God to save them from the sorrow of the death of a loved one. Some ask God to send rain when their cornfields need it, or to send the sun on Spring Festival and Home-Coming days. Some want God to help them in examinations. The little six year old boy ended his evening bedside prayer with this petition, "Now God, please bring me my pajamas which are hanging in the clothes closet".

I am not asking you to have faith in that kind of a God. The God in whom I ask you to believe is not a nursemaid, nor an aspirin tablet, nor a rain-maker, nor a tutor, nor a professional hostess whose duty is to make the customers feel happy all the time.

I do ask you to put your eternal faith in a majestic God who is operating this world on moral laws which are just as exacting and precise and observable as are the physical laws on which the universe operates on schedule time day after day, year after year, century after century, age after age, without deviation and without default. The same great mind that created these precise physical laws created equally precise moral laws. The very core of the moral law is "Love thy neighbor as thyself". It is as silly of us to disobey that basic moral law as it would be to disobey the basic physical law of gravity.

Don't lose your faith in God, because when men disobey his great majestic

rules of the universe they bring suffering upon themselves. That would be a queer perversion of logic. Can you imagine the grace and beauty of this human world if all men would obey His moral law simultaneously?

Put your faith in Him openly against the cynics. Bow your head to His will, submit your life to His law of unselfishness, worship Him on Sunday, believe evermore in His plan for brotherhood; soon you will feel a new zest, a new power, a new sense of dignity, of values, of eagerness to live and lift and serve. For you will be hooking up your life to the cosmic high tension lines of the universe, through which flow the everlasting powers of creative life itself. There can be no fifth column of doubt, of cynicism, of befuddlement in the heart and mind of a person who has made dynamic contact with the living and loving God. That person knows the meaning of life. The lives of millions of people, including my own, have been transformed, quickened, electrified by making this contact with the eternal God of majesty, of moral law, and of tender love.

If there are any among you who sincerely want to make contact with such a God and cannot do it, come and see me, or drop me a note and I will try to help you.

Third, you may have faith that there is a right and wrong in human affairs and that in the long run the right will prevail. Civilization is a constant contest between right and wrong, a seesaw battle in which first one, then the other, triumphs for the time being. Evil is enthroned now, to be sure, for its brief day of glory. I may never see the world forces of right prevail again in my lifetime, but you will in yours. "God does not pay every Saturday night", goes a French proverb. But He pays eventually in His own time and in His own coin.

This Evil has millions of unwilling subjects. I predict a most uncomfortable reign for it, and I prophesy that you, in your day, will see Right enthroned

again--provided you will banish any fifth column of doubt that there is no difference between right and wrong.

Recently we have seen a befuddled young king make a most difficult moral decision at a time of terrific stress. When the country his father had defended was invaded, he asked help from his neighbors. Eighteen days later, when 300,000 of his neighbors had responded and were fighting on his soil, he laid down his arms and left them alone to their dreadful fate. It is not for us to judge him; history will do that over the long, impersonal perspective of time. But we can learn a lesson from his tragedy. His real tragedy was not at the moment of surrender under stress. His real tragedy was at a moment four years before, during days of peace and relative tranquility, when he canceled the treaty his rugged father had written in blood with his democratic neighbors. This young king could not see any difference between democracy and despotism, between decency and evil, between a right and a wrong. This confusion of moral values in time of peace became a fifth column of weakness which betrayed him in time of stress.

You will not be called on to make any such decision as he had to make. But your decisions will mean as much to your own happiness and usefulness as his did to him. Whenever you rationalize as right what you know to be wrong, whenever you surrender your decency and your honesty because someone has discovered smooth ways in which you can be indecent and dishonest, you are creating within your personality a fifth column that will eventually betray you to a life of mediocrity and unhappiness.

The historian, Froude, has described a group of men and women, the Calvinists of the past three centuries, who had abiding faith in the right as they understood it, and whose strong convictions laid the foundations of our civilization on this continent, in these words, "When all else has failed--when patriotism has covered its face, when human courage has broken down, when intellect has

yielded--when emotion and sentiment have dreamt themselves into forgetfulness that there is any difference between lies and truth, the form of belief called Calvinism has borne ever an inflexible front to illusion and mendacity, and has preferred rather to be ground to powder like flint than to melt before enervating temptation."

Never have we so desperately needed a generation of intelligent young men and women with an undying faith in right versus wrong, as we now need you. And never has a generation of youth so much needed for its own soul's good to gamble its all that there is a difference between right and wrong and that it will rather be ground to powder like flint than to lower its high ideals of right. There is a black and there is a white in human conduct. There is a wrong and there is a right. When everything is gray, neither wrong nor right, the fifth column has moved in and will betray you. I hope and believe that you will put your faith in the right as you understand it, and gamble your life on it, win or lose.

Fourth, put your faith also in these Arts of Peace that you have learned at Bucknell, these enthusiasms for wholesome, creative expressions such as music, literature, sport, science, art and the like which enrich and ennoble human life. Keep these interests and cultivate them as your hobbies. There may be hard external times ahead, but no matter--if you can carry these cultural nourishments in your minds and souls. "Men shall not live by bread alone". You know how to fill your knapsacks with food that will never perish, except by your own neglect.

"If, between dawn and darkness, you can find
Somewhere, some secret loveliness to lie
Cool on the heart, some attribute of sky,
Hushing the vicious wheeling of the mind;
Some attribute of earth--a willow-frond,
Lifted by wind; three snow-white birches bowed

Over a pool; a shell, a stone, a cloud --
You will have found the rainbow's pot of gold;
Wise men, since earth was very young, would give
Kingdoms for such. Nothing betrays them--cold,
Nor heat, nor storm. Possess them while you live;
Then, dying, test them from the closer range,
Change within substance defying change."

(John Williams Andrews)

Finally -- have faith in your children. In the years ahead, many of you will become mothers and fathers of little children whose minds and souls will be innocent of the failures and sins and shallowness of our day. Keep cynicism and falsehood and selfish flabbiness away from their tiny, sweet worlds. Breathe into their souls from their first instants of awareness these great truths and loves and faiths by which men become free and noble and happy. Twenty years from now send us a generation of Bucknellians, prepared in spirit and in character to become builders of the City of Light. Together, you as parents, we as college teachers, can create such a generation ready to live like intelligent and unselfish brothers under the fatherhood of a living God.

It is queer how many ways there are to describe the Bucknell way of life. This talk has just been another way of saying, "Be true to the Bucknell way of life". And it is equally queer how many ways there are of describing the Christian way of life. For this farewell talk to you has been, also, just another way of saying, "Be true to the Christian way of life". For faith in high idealism and integrity and brotherhood are precisely the values for which Jesus lived and taught and died. And it is his spirit which lures us on to this way of life. A great man of another desperate day was often discouraged, but his courage was renewed time after time until final victory by his loyalty to Christ. Said he, "Again and again I have been tempted to give up the struggle,

but always the figure of that Strange Man hanging on the Cross sent me back to my work again".

"O Risen Christ

By the power of Thine empty tomb,

We beseech Thee,

Out of this death bring life,

Out of this jungle-promise, philtres of love,

And simples of healing, and garlands."

(Florence Converse)

And now your Bucknell education is over. Tomorrow I shall hand you your diplomas. In the years to come you will think of your experiences and of your friends here with appreciation, and with tenderness, and affection. If you should include me in your memories, please do not think only of me as the president under whom this or that building was erected, or this or that accreditation of Bucknell was obtained, or this or that move in behalf of faculty or of students was taken. Think of me, rather, if you can do so sincerely, as your leader and your friend who gave all that he possessed of strength and devotion, in a day of cynicism and of false and shoddy values, to keep you from being betrayed. That is why I have carried on with you and for you in these grueling four years. If memories of Bucknell include a flicker or quickening of strong faith and high idealisms as you think of me, I shall be fully repaid.

Now, you cease to be students, and you take your places as colleagues with the rest of us who are battling for the eternal values of human civilization. It's going to be a grand battle. I congratulate you on the privilege of living in this hour when we are to drop all the trappings of sham and pretense, and oppose courage and honor and character and faith in their sheerest, elemental form to the naked forces of falsehood and cruelty and despotism. Great days lie ahead for moral heroes. May each Bucknellian of the Class of 1940 be true!

