

USC Convocation Address

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“Ten score and ten years ago our fathers brought forth in this state a new university, conceived in Liberty—and in Wisdom as well—and dedicated to the proposition that *emollit mores nec sinit esse feros.*”

I’ve been asked to say a few words about USC’s academic traditions and expectations. I begin in this peculiar way for three reasons. First, the weirder a thing is the longer it sticks in our minds, and like all speakers I’m hoping you’ll remember at least something of what I say here today. My second reason has to do with the time constraints I’m working under. I was told I should speak for seven minutes or so—seven *short* minutes in which to inform, encourage, and entice. I was sure the task I’d been set was impossible, until I remembered the speech I’ve just deliberately echoed, Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. Often regarded as the most famous in American history, it was perhaps also the shortest. It was ten sentences long, and Lincoln delivered it in two minutes flat. Clearly I’ve more than enough time if I use it prudently.

Which brings me to my third reason. A picture, they say, is worth a thousand words. I realized what prudence required was a visual aid, something you could look at

while I speak and preferably something you would likely see again as a reminder of my remarks. I was therefore delighted to learn that one of USC's most visible and recognizable icons would be on hand here today—not quite as recognizable as Cocky, perhaps, but richer in meaning for an academic occasion! I'm talking about the University's official seal, prominently displayed on the stage behind me as well as on your programs. With a little help from Honest Abe, I've given you the gist of its message already, and I'll add something in just a moment about the imagery. But first a translation of the Latin: *emollit mores nec sinit esse ferus*.

As you've no doubt guessed, these words are the University's motto, and they can be rendered into English in a variety of ways: "It refines the manners and corrects their harshness." "It improves our character and keeps us from cruelty." Or (my personal favorite): "It softens the heart and curbs the wild desires." I realize the motto on its own, at least in these translations, may not sound too inspiring. Someone has quipped that a lobotomy might also improve your character and keep you from cruelty! While it's difficult not to smile at such satire, the images on the seal are proof something rather different is at stake.

What we see are two human figures: Wisdom, represented by the goddess Minerva on the right, and Liberty, the figure on the left. And they're holding hands, indicating some sort of union between them. Meanwhile Liberty's other hand is raised toward the sky, and there's an eagle soaring overhead. Together these are indisputable clues that the liberating education here depicted is meant to lift us above, not lower us beneath, our previous capacities, assumptions, and expectations. In light of this symbolism, a less literal but more telling paraphrase of the motto might be: "It gives us

the inward freedom and strength not to be distracted or discouraged by the inevitable struggles and challenges of life”; or perhaps: “It focuses our otherwise volatile and scattered thoughts, giving us wings to rise above ourselves, and helping us realize the full potential of the human mind and heart”. This, in short, is the promise of a Carolina education.

It’s a promise, however, that can’t be fulfilled without effort. I realize we often talk about “receiving” an education, but that’s actually a very misleading expression. On the contrary, a good education is something you must reach out and grasp, go out and confront, and seize for yourselves.

The question, of course, is how best to do that. In answer I could give you all sorts of standard advice: study hard, stay on top of your academic requirements, get to know your professors, take advantage of the numerous extracurricular opportunities Carolina provides. But standard is boring. So, to keep your attention as I begin moving toward my conclusion, I’m going to say something weird again: “Beware of Bulverism.” Over thirty years of college teaching experience tells me this is the key to fulfilling USC’s promise and getting the most from your next four years.

I expect you’ve not encountered this term before, and that’s no surprise. Bulverism is a made-up word, occurring as far as I know only once in all English literature, in a short essay with that title by one of my all-time favorite authors, C. S. Lewis. Lewis himself doesn’t define the word. But he gives us the clue we need to its meaning when he says that he’s long considered writing the biography of its imaginary inventor, one Ezekiel Bulver, who at the age of six overheard his mother say to his father, who’d been maintaining that any two sides of a triangle are together greater than the

third, “Oh, you just say that because you’re a man!” Suddenly it dawned upon young Mr Bulver that rational discourse was no necessary part of conversation. All you have to do is assume the people you disagree with are wrong and then dismiss their error as arising from the box or category you’ve decided to place them in.

Lewis is teasing, of course—teasing, that is, about six-year old Zeke. He’s perfectly serious, however, about the phenomenon, and so am I. Bulverism, or “you-just-say-that-because-ism”, is everywhere in our culture today. In fact it’s very tempting for all of us, even in a university environment, to dodge the difficult work of thinking by instead being Bulverists. And be assured, Bulverism spans a whole spectrum. It applies not just to the relatively crass and predictable: “So-and-so just says that because she’s a woman, or because he’s a Republican, or because she’s a Clemson fan.” It also crops up among the allegedly sophisticated: “So-and-so just says that because he’s a Platonist, or because she’s a dean, or because (horror of horrors!) he hasn’t read my latest book.” I give these last examples simply to show I’m not just picking on you entering freshmen!

No, Bulverism is a disease we must *all* labor hard to avoid. For Bulverists, as I hope you can see, are the real lobotomists, with this difference: that the brains they injure most are their own. Until we stop pigeon-holing the people around us and begin opening ourselves to the humbling possibility that they may see the world in important ways we haven’t and may therefore know something important we don’t, we’ll never realize the full potential of our minds and hearts. So I say to you: Dedicate *yourselves* to the proposition that *emollit mores nec sinit esse feros*. Beware of Bulverism. Fly like eagles.