

This Was Commencement 1969

By STUART G. BAIRD

What was Macalester's 1969 Commencement really like?

The answer to that question apparently depends on whom you ask. But here are some responses selected from mail received by various college officials from people who attended Commencement as well as from those who read reports in the press about the exercises — reports, incidentally, which were gained second hand, since no members of the press were in attendance.

Here are excerpts from correspondents who objected to the program, which found students wearing everyday clothing, instead of caps and gowns, and replaced the more traditional commencement speaker with a student-produced show entitled, "The Rites of Spring."

"TO SAY THAT WE were disappointed would be a gross understatement. The lack of consideration for the audience by the students who were responsible for this program and by the administration for their failure to exercise some degree of direction and control over the content and presentation of the program was very evident. . . If the purpose of the presentation was to influence and persuade the parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters and loved ones of some fact or some point of view other than the one that they already maintained, the presentation was a failure. The presentation developed resentment, misunderstanding, widened whatever generation gap there was, and one could only conclude that the young people who were putting this program on were indeed very immature — or arrogant — or they lacked sensitivity, humility and understanding that they voice but do not demonstrate. . ."

". . . WE ARE STILL a little nauseous. We, among the many parents who could not stomach the scene, stood outside, waiting for the diplomas to be handed out so we could flee. . ."

"IT IS OUR UNDERSTANDING that the seniors voted on the cap and gown issue. They had a choice of Mixed Caps and Gowns or No Caps

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and Gowns. What happened to the choice of All Caps and Gowns? Was this a democratic process? And do you feel that students always know what is best for themselves or for the college as a whole?"

"I FEEL THAT my brother's graduation was done in extremely bad taste and very inappropriate for a graduation exercise."

There was support, too:

"AS PARENTS . . . WE CONGRATULATE . . . Macalester College for making possible these unusual and impressive baccalaureate and graduation ceremonies. We think you were correct when you said at the graduation that we of the older generation must listen to what our juniors are saying. It is understandable that not everyone would agree with ideas or the manner of expressing them, but it was wise to provide the students with the opportunity to express their point of view, and the parents with the opportunity to listen.

"We regret that some of the adults present (fortunately a small minority) saw fit to express their disagreement by booing. It is also unfortunate that Sunday morning's newspaper account presented so distorted a picture of what happened.

"The baccalaureate presentation by the students of 'Dare to Celebrate' was dignified and thoughtful. The 'Rites of Spring' clearly represented a great effort which must have involved many of the students: it had considerable artistic and intellectual merit, and certainly offered more than many a Commencement address."

"FOR WHAT IT'S WORTH, you can put me down as one 'alum' who approves of all the goings on at Mac."

"I . . . PREFERRED THIS year's Commencement exercises to the more traditional format. Probably more rehearsal and certainly a slower delivery on the part of the narrator would have made 'Rites of Spring' more effective. Probably as students become full participants they may tend to exert a conservative influence rather than an unsettling factor. . ."

"WE BOTH FEEL it was an unusual and hon-

est program; very timely and meaningful. We are proud to have had our son attend and graduate from a school whose administrators had 'the time' to allow the young to say how they felt about this world of ours we put them into."

At least one letter took a "long look" at the program:

"THE COMMENCEMENT innovation was a noble experiment. . . It was a masterpiece of student-level psychological and technological accomplishment. Professional presentation and content would have been less obvious and toned down enough to hear the message. If it was designed to stir emotions it accomplished its purpose, as the audible clash of opinion at its conclusion testified.

"It reflected a totally unhappy state of mind, and yet there must have been many graduating students who are too full of life's approaching new adventures to be totally unhappy. The one speaking voice that could be understood and said 'Hear us, for we have a thousand times more love than vitriol,' yet I saw no reflection of love in the presentation, though much love is available.

. . . "I could find little dignity in bare feet or sloppy pajamas one might prepare breakfast in. Casual clothing might still be underneath a 'cap and gown,' but such covering would at least reflect a recognition of the dignity of the occasion. Such covering is not superficial. It is not irrelevant. Its lack did great injury to the dignity of the event.

"The noble experiment became an experience. Though technically good it was shallow and incomplete in thought and content. I hope all can learn from this experience and again change for the better in the future."

Other letters were less concerned with the "what" of Commencement than they were with the "how" or "why."

Fred Kramer, dean of students, answers these questions.

"In many significant aspects of its educational program, Macalester has made policy decisions that students should have a greater voice in making decisions about events which touch their lives," said Dean Kramer.

"Commencement, clearly, is one of those events, and in December the Faculty Out-of-Class Activities Committee recommended to the President that Commencement be basically more of a college-community affair, and that no outside speaker be invited this year. The faculty committee also recommended that the Senior Class be given the major responsibility in planning the format of commencement."

The dean also provided background on the "cap and gown" issue.

"The senior class officers, in developing a committee of interested seniors, tried to be cognizant of the wishes of the seniors — but there was quite a bit of divided opinion on whether caps and gowns

should be worn. Finally, the Senior Class officers decided to submit it to a vote of the entire class. Two hundred forty of the approximately 360 seniors then on campus voted, and the vote was 160 against caps and gowns and 80 in favor. As a result, the committee decided not to have caps and gowns for the seniors.

"It is worth noting that there was a group of students who felt so strongly about not wearing caps and gowns that they would not wear them, under any circumstances. The Senior Class committee thought their rights should be respected, and agreed that they should still be able to participate in Commencement if they wished. Therefore, the final vote was on whether to have a cap-and-gown ceremony where some students would not be in caps and gowns or one in which there would be no caps and gowns at all. Some students objected to this choice, but the committee felt that it was realistic."

Here is Dean Kramer's reaction to the program:

"I believe that a great deal of misunderstanding arose from the fact that technical difficulties and sound difficulties prevented many persons in the audience from receiving a clear picture of the dialogue that accompanied the pictures. Nevertheless, we felt, and still feel, it was important for the senior group to have an opportunity to present a program that was meaningful to them. They were also concerned with trying to present something that would be appropriate and meaningful to parents, because they realize that Commencement is a significant moment in the lives of most parents.

"Since we believe it is important that students have an opportunity to share in the significant programs of the College, it then seems particularly appropriate that seniors who are ready to assume their responsibilities in the world should be given the opportunity to provide a significant contribution to Commencement exercises.

"This last commencement did break new ground, and there was, of course, argument as to the appropriateness of the particular program at commencement. I am sure that as a result of that program, the students involved in the planning of next year's Commencement will give very careful thought to developing a program that communicates to all members of the audience."

What did the students have in mind?

Here is the explanation of Lawrence D. Clamons, '69, North Wales, Pa., the creator of "Rites of Spring."

In general, the student graduation committee tried to preserve the dignity of the Macalester College graduation exercises while at the same time allowing some freedom of expression for the Macalester seniors and faculty. One outcome of this policy was the rejection of caps and gowns by a fair vote of the Macalester seniors. The other re-

sult was the program, "Rites of Spring." This is what the program was about.

Basically, I felt that too often speakers were brought in who spoke of the world that we as seniors would have to face, and the seniors' view of the world was overlooked, if not totally discounted. I felt that a senior graduation should be a place where the seniors could and should show to their parents and to alumni what they had learned about the world in their four years of study at Macalester. I felt that senior speeches would be disregarded as much as would an outside speaker. I felt, however, that it would be most difficult not to absorb something from a slide show. After presenting these reasons and some plans for the program, and after due discussion by the committee, I was told to produce "Rites of Spring."

"Rites of Spring" was divided into three sections. The first section was an introduction covering a symbolic struggle through academia and final freedom, a quick look at events that affected everyone in the past four years, and an invitation for those willing to come on a tour of a senior's world.

The film section of the program was used as an expression of the work done in four years at Macalester, and the final completion of that work. Shown with the film was a series of slides covering the following subjects:

- 1) Student Unrest — a subject I felt would be closest to the surface of a student's mind. It was indicative of the dissatisfaction many students felt toward their education at Macalester.
- 2) Foreign Student Unrest — a natural switch from U.S. unrest.
- 3) Crete and Arab-Israeli War — a look at more foreign unrest.
- 4) Monetary Instability — a slightly tricky sequence that went war, finance war, inflation, monetary instability.
- 5) American Riots — a change from foreign monetary crises to American monetary crises and specific results of those crises.
- 6) Great Society — a look at Johnson's dream for America after seeing that dream not working.
- 7) Hippies — another small glimpse of the disillusionment of the Great Society.
- 8) Miami Beach Convention — a look at the hippie cause peacefully attacking the establishment.
- 9) Chicago Convention — a look at the unpeaceful establishment hippie confrontation.
- 10) Czechoslovakia Invasion — I felt that Chicago and Czechoslovakia were handled similarly and tried to show that Americans and Russians are basically the same when they feel threatened.
- 11) Vietnam and Korea — a look at U.S. involvement and featuring the "Pueblo" and EC-121 spy plane.

- 12) Aeronautical Achievement—capsule look at space.
- 13) Dr. King's and Sen. Kennedy's Assassinations — the tragic heritage of a violent, vengeful society.
- 14) The last two slides showed the promise of the future. One slide was Richard M. Nixon; the other a picture representing our generation as "children of the bomb."

This completed the first section of the program. The narrator then spoke of our generation's view of the world and its hypocrisy and invited the audience to share with us our view.

The second section of the program was divided into five sections. The first section dealt with the armed forces. I dealt with this first as it most directly affected the lives of the seniors. In this section, I tried to show that there are a number of alternatives open to seniors concerning the draft. I also tried to show a view of the armed forces slogan, "Join NOW and See the World." How much of the world can you see if you are killed in Vietnam or the Dominican Republic? This section had a definite anti-war slant.

The second section was concerned with racism. This problem is overworked and it was difficult to come up with a fresh approach. I tried to connect this problem to Macalester and its role in helping alleviate the problem. I took the problem from many angles. The first part was pictures from old and new yearbooks representative of pictures throughout the books. These pictures tended to show a lack of black students; a question about this lack was raised at Macalester by the students. Then, a look at reverse racism at Macalester and other universities. Some pictures of black self-consciousness were shown. Finally, I pieced together a section on St. Paul's ghetto and Macalester's role in improving the black situation.

The third section dealt with jobs. It showed a variety of jobs, most of which Macalester students would not be taking. These jobs were representative, however, of things that students did during summers that led to experience with life and possible use in future jobs.

The fourth section dealt with censorship. This section was aimed primarily at the fact that pornography and sexual lewdness are basically products of a person's mind. The main part of this section was the narration which was an excerpt from the minority opinion of a Supreme Court case on pornography as expressed by Justice Hugo Black. The pictures explained themselves and cannot be explained here.

The last section was a long section that summed up what I tried to convey in the other parts of the program also. I entitled this section, "Hollow Words." I felt that part of the "generation gap" was caused by the change in meaning of many major phrases that controlled people's lives. I put together this section with the idea of show-

ing how some words and phrases had changed in meaning for our generation. This section had six divisions. They were:

- 1) War on Poverty — originally a government project, and often still left as such. The new generation traces this on an individual basis.
- 2) Equality — equality is all too often put on a black-white basis. This section focuses on Indians, Mexican-Americans, and poor whites.
- 3) Fighting for Peace — whereas the older generation sees that this is to be taken literally, the new generation sees that there is more than one way to fight for peace. Many join an organization known as the Peace Corps and many feel protest against war will help bring peace faster than will bullets and bayonets.
- 4) Keep America Beautiful — This phrase has kept its meaning and was but in the section to show that some things can be agreed upon. The slides here dealt with different aspects of the pollution problem.
- 5) Civil Disobedience — too often petty crimes are condoned as long as people are not caught. Many of the new generation felt that this attitude leads to lapses in larger issues. The problem is one of petty thievery versus massive civil rights disobedience and which is better and which leads to what. It also brings us the question of law — its need and its use. While a person respected for petty theft can go on to larger crimes or a good job, a person who disobeys laws in the name of civil rights often extends this condolence into acts of violence in city riots and at university campuses. As to who is right — I cannot answer and did not try.
- 6) Love — this word has gone through many changes. For a while love only occurred between compatible people. Same skin color, religion, social attitudes, and political attitudes. Today, the new generation is presenting nondenominational love. Once before a man taught this. He held what might be called original love-ins. His name was Jesus.

While making the program, I did not try to come to any conclusions or to answer any of the questions raised. I felt that all I knew was the question itself, and that only time would see if my generation would fare any better than others. Still, there is a beginning and I felt it needed expression. I admit that the program I drew up was biased in the direction of my personal opinions. However, I feel that it presented enough of both sides to be as objective as any other piece of material.

As a general summing up, it might be said that today's youth is trying to live by the standards set down for them by their parents, and they are finding that these standards are looked down upon and ignored by those who profess to live by them.

The following letter was written by Dr. Hildegard Binder Johnson, Chairman of the Macalester Geography Department, and appeared in the Sunday, June 1, 1969, edition of the Minneapolis Tribune. It provides additional commentary on the Commencement program from the point of view of a faculty member.

To the Editor: The "newfangled" graduation ceremonies at Macalester College reported May 25 ("Macalester Crowd Boos at Graduation") were led, as is traditional, by the Scottish Bag Pipe Band, began with the singing of the "Star Spangled Banner," and included an invocation by a professor of the religion department and benediction by the assistant chaplain.

By far the longest time was given over to the profession of all graduating students to the platform, with each name announced by the dean and the college president greeting each student.

An unusual gesture by President Arthur Flemming was the announcement that he had noticed for years how parents in such an audience brought cameras to take pictures of their graduates at the decisive moment, but were sitting in a poor location for this purpose. He would, after the ceremony, gladly return and pose with graduates individually for such pictures on the platform.

There are a few minor corrections: All men wore suits. One student reported to have "said she thought too much emphasis was placed on grades" had a page explaining her convictions distributed outside the field house, and the dean, not she, upon her request, announced that she planned not to accept her degree.

Students did not respond to the booing at the end of the light show, but applause for "The Rites of Spring" came first and was answered by booing.

Parents' comments heard by this participant ranged from "this was a most disappointing Commencement" to "my husband and I are grateful that our daughter could go to a school where students are permitted to try something like this."

The latter parents turned out to have watched serious disturbances at close range at one of the most renowned universities of the United States.

I am the mother of two graduate students, aged 27 and 25, and should probably identify myself most with a lady who confided to me: "I did not understand it, but I am sure they wanted to tell Dad and me something. If only we could understand."

If the comparatively short show was technically a bit rough—the students had a short time for preparation and were in the midst of finals—and if some people were offended, it still was one commencement where the whole hall was packed, with many of the next graduating class present, and where everybody paid attention.

This, considering that each student in the largest graduating class of Macalester's history got the same individual attention as in the good old days of small classes, is an achievement.

Never mind the endless hours spent in committees, interviews and meetings which are behind such "newfangled" happenings on a campus; never mind that parents, students and teachers are divided when such experiments are voted in. But please do mind when a college—trustees, administrators, professors, students—works hard to bring about change through orderly process.

The Bagpipe Band can be pretty loud, too. Is it not better to offend some ears by loud music, and some eyes by pictures of starving children in Biafra and destruction in Vietnam, than to lose all chance for communication by bringing the police on a campus?

This I ask, not as a professor at Macalester for 23 years, but as a naturalized citizen of the United States who left Germany in 1934.