Thirty years ago, President John F. Kennedy spoke on Founder’s Day

by Robert M. Hammond

Chairman’s Address
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Mr. Chairman, I am pleased to announce that the University of Vanderbilt has been awarded a grant of $500,000 by the Ford Foundation for the support of its program in the humanities. This grant will enable us to continue our efforts to improve the quality of education and research in the arts and sciences.

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The Ford Foundation has generously provided funds for the development of new programs in the humanities, including the establishment of a new department of comparative literature. These funds will also support a series of lectures and seminars on contemporary literary and cultural issues.

Moreover, the grant will enable us to create a new center for the study of the humanities, which will bring together faculty from the arts and sciences to explore interdisciplinary approaches to the study of human culture.

I am confident that this grant will have a significant impact on the future of our University, and I am deeply grateful to the Ford Foundation for its generous support.

Thank you.
President John F. Kennedy addressed a large crowd at Vanderbilt Stadium on May 18, 1963, as camera clicked and rolled.

more than 570 flags, bunting, and special gold and blue signs proclaiming "Welcome Mr. President—It's Metro Day for JFK." Tennesseans were excited over the first presidential visit since that of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1916. Crowd estimates along the parade route were between 300,000 and 400,000. Some bands from mid-state area high schools and colleges also lined the route. In his speech, the President expressed his warm appreciation for his generous welcome "particularly to all those young men and women who lined the streets and made our walk as we drove into the stadium. We are glad they are here with us, and we feel the musical future of this city and state is assured." At the President's car entered the stadium, the crowd rose in a standing ovation, and the Vanderbilt-Poloha band struck up "Hail to the Chief." Passing

together were clear, concise, reasoned, and sequential. The speech at Vanderbilt was no exception. Time magazine called it "a gem," and the Vanderbilt address "spirited and eloquent."

The President began by expressing thanks for the welcome he had received. He praised TVA and its accomplishments and announced the construction of two dams in Middle Tennessee. One was to be named in honor of Cordell Hull, the Tennessean who served as Secretary of State under FDR, and the other in honor of former Congressman J. Percy Priest.

Perhaps what is most remarkable about JFK's visit to Vanderbilt is that, during a time of intense racial tension in Birmingham and other places, he came to the South and spoke for the civil rights of all Americans. From Vanderbilt he went on to Alabama to make a speech at Muscle Shoals marking TVA's thirtieth anniversary and to visit Redstone Arsenal at Huntsville. While on that leg of his journey he met briefly with Alabama Governor George Wallace who was adamantly fighting the civil rights movement.

Kenedy devoted most of his time to emphasizing the duties of an educated citizen. "Of all the many special obligations incumbent upon an educated citizen," he cited three as outstanding: an obligation to the pursuit of learning, an obligation to serve the public, an obligation to uphold the law. He urged the educated citizen to be active in public affairs at all levels of government. "He may be a civil servant or a senator, a candidate or a campaign worker, a winner or a loser. But he must be a participant and not a spectator."

The President quoted Aristotle. "At the Olympic games it is not the finest country, and all sections of it, so that all our people will be one."

Kennedy said that the Commodore's response to Bishop McTyrone - "gave Vanderbilt not only an endorsement, but also a banner. Vanderbilt is in a time of tension, it is more important than ever that our courage and strength these ties so that all of our people will be one."

He concluded, "Ninety years from now, I have no doubt that Vanderbilt University will still be fulfilling this mission. It will still uphold learning, encourage public service, and teach respect for law. It will neither turn its back on truth and wisdom nor turn its face from newborn challenge. It will still pass on to the youth of our land the best of their rights and their responsibilities. And it will still be teaching the truth - the truth that makes us free, and will keep us free."

The crowd surged to its feet at a standing ovation. President Kennedy returned to his car, and then Chancellor Heard reminded him that he had not pressed the key that would signal the start of the traditional bell. Cordell Hull Dam. Kennedy returned to the podium and pressed the key. Over the loud speakers the sound of an explosion was transmitted from the dam site about fifty miles away. Kennedy laughed and said, "Really, how shows easy it is to be a President."

"Those who were there on the day the President spoke have happy memories of the occasion. It was an exciting and successful event," said McGaw. "Even the people who had not voted for Kennedy would not vote for Kennedy liked the drama of the occasion," said Heard. "It was a very beautiful, wonderful day, and there was a kind of holiday mood. It was a great celebration."

A plaque commemorating Kennedy's address at Vanderbilt was dedicated on the first anniversary of his visit, six months after his death. The plaque was originally on the wall on the side of the stadium. During the last stadium renovation it was moved to the wall on the south side of the stadium. On game day it is partially hidden behind a Pepsi stand. It reads in part: "The essence of Vanderbilt is still learning. The essence of its outlook is still liberty. Liberty without learning is always in peril, and learning without liberty is always in vain. This state, this city, this campus have stood long for both human rights and human enlightenment—and let that forever be true."

President John F. Kennedy May 18, 1963

Vanderbilt University