Class Days and Alumni Reunions

With Yale’s Commencement 2016 [2] just past, and the appearance of crowds of Yale alums and their loved ones celebrating reunions over the next two weekends, we thought we’d take a look through the collections in Manuscripts and Archives and see what was going on in 1991, since the Yale College Class of 1991 is holding its 25th reunion this year.

Yale’s senior class gets to invite someone to address them on Class Day [3], which occurs on Old Campus the Sunday before Commencement each year. The Class of 1991 invited Doonesbury cartoonist, and member of the Yale College Class of 1970, Garry Trudeau to give its Class Day address. Trudeau began cartooning while a Yale undergraduate, and contributed the strip Bull Tales [4], Doonesbury’s precursor, to the Yale Daily News.

In recalling the days of his Yale College career, and reflecting on the “good intentions of the young,” Trudeau delivered some sage words of advice to the class of 1991, as relevant today as they were then. His address is preserved in RU 236 [5] in Manuscripts and Archives, but here’s an excerpt to give you a taste:

[1]
My advice to you: make a break for it. Take off. Cut your own swath. Stride out from under the longest shadow ever cast by a generation. Ask your own impertinent questions. There are many at hand.

Wonder aloud what war is like for all its participants. Check out the accounting, what it cost us as a nation. Was it the same war for you as it was for the Army engineers who, away from the cameras, bulldozed 100,000 dead conscripts into the pits left by collapsed bunkers?

A focus group of college students told a reporter last winter that they all supported the war, but not one would consider it his duty to join. “It may sound selfish,” said one student, “but I don’t think the best and the brightest should be on the front lines.

Wonder, too, about the homefront agenda that got overlooked; the energy policy that may have made the war inevitable; an environmental agenda that has been all but abandoned; a business culture so moribund that even 70% of the high-tech components used in our Gulf War weapon systems were produced in Japan.

These questions, when given a public voice, are all part of the ongoing dialogue between those who lead and those who would be lead. Ours is a system whose very vitality depends on its raucous dissent, its competing visions of how it should work. America is still very much a work in progress, and one of the things that has always distinguished it from other countries is that we’ve always been open to reinventing ourselves for the common good.
Commencement exercises, then-President George H.W. Bush was given an honorary Doctor of Laws degree by Yale University.

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