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Go Home, Young Man, Go Home!

By Pare Lorentz

NEW OUTLOOK's own Commencement Day address, prepared and delivered by Pare Lorentz, critic of the stage and screen, and a serious student of the Depression, even tells the young, unwanted Bachelor of Arts where he can go.



GENTLEMEN OF THE GRADUATING CLASS OF 1933: *Greetings!* About to accept your responsibilities, and to become a responsibility, to the state, you are, unhappily, as you soon will realize, forgotten men. Few people will welcome your immediate entrance into society. You are, gentlemen, to be frank, so many unwanted children. Doctors, lawyers, dentists, engineers and business men in the raw, you will quickly find what you obviously do not realize at this moment: the shocking fact that hundreds and thousands of older, wiser, abler men than yourselves are at present seeking what you seek: work.

You know, of course, that "times are hard." Your own college personnel directors have been kind enough to give you some idea of just how difficult it is going to be for you to find work. You know that less than ten per cent of the post-graduate professional men from last year's class have found work. And, too, you have heard from home. Allowances have been cut. Classmates have had to drop out of college. Old family friends have had grave misfortunes. Homes have been lost. You know all these things, but you can't realize them fully at this moment. You will, unfortunately, realize them only too well when you yourselves try to find a place in the world.



Yet I don't feel sorry for you, because you are young. If all of you marched out of here this afternoon without a nickel to your names, you at least would have age on your side; few of you have responsibilities, except to yourselves; you would not have worked twenty years only to find yourselves through, forced to start over again, as is the case today with many talented men.

But when I said a minute ago, you "obviously" did not understand the state of your country, I meant more than a general statement of unemployed conditions. You not only have been sheltered for at least four years

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from society, which makes it impossible for you to know positively the grinding burden of idleness; you also have been deluded—not for four years, but for a lifetime.

Not wilfully, let me add, but completely, deluded. You yourselves are proof of that. Look at your own record. Is there a magazine, a newspaper, a representative body among you that has even

an attitude toward national politics, economics? There is not. Have you even made an effort to understand the causes of approaching war? Have you even seriously considered what you might do about war, were it declared tomorrow? You have not.



Of course, during your cloistered years a (let us put it gently) cautious national press and administration refused to be annoyed with the facts. Daily bank failures, buried in city papers among patent medicine advertisements. A march on Washington. Bloodless revolution in the farm country. We all were going to turn the corner, and you waited with the crowd. But the real reason, you, of all people, did not concern yourselves, was because of the great illusion you inherited. And that, gentlemen, is what I want to talk to you about—not about how hard it is going to be for you to find work, not how strapped the nation is, nor how many incompetent, crooked, or greedy men we may have had in public life.

I don't want to give you statistics on unemployment or advice on where to find work. The serious problem that faces you is the very way of working. Because you inherited an illusion about your country, so strong, today you are about as fit to start tinkering with the machinery of business existing in this country as a small boy is able to postulate Einstein's theory. I don't feel, either, that you are especially stupid and lazy; on the contrary, I think you are soberer than the classes of ten years ago. But you have a job ahead of you, and you might as well realize right now that the country you think you live in does not exist.



You were born and bred and fostered on a pioneer religion. Whether you know it or not, you read it in your classrooms, you played it in your games, you heard it on street corners, you ate it, slept it, dreamed it and lived it. A great lusty juvenile religion, a national bumptiousness and unshakeable confidence. You belong to the country of the westward migration; the forty-niners; the railroad builders, the land boomers, the wild-catters, the copper kings; the country of Boone, of Jim Hill, of Henry Ford, of Owen D. Young. Even our last President was an orphan who first made a fortune and then the White House.

Well, following the concentration of industry for the World War, that country was put to work running a machine so complex, so intricate, you don't even begin to understand the nature of it. How could you? You were born to believe that with time and luck all things were possible. And so did your fathers. And even now they themselves are only dazedly beginning to understand just what happened to them. What happened to you is simple—the country you think you live in was snatched from you.

I don't expect you to believe me, because you have too much confidence, and I like that; furthermore, you yourselves do not realize how deeply you believe in this great illusion. Things will be better. Certainly. But for you, fundamentally different. And I don't ask you to believe me. I send you to some good witnesses. I send you to the class reunions of the men of '22, '24, '28. Talk to them and listen. What will you find? Confusion and disillusionment. Not because they are poorer than they were, or out of work, but because they followed the

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great illusion and discovered suddenly that they had no idea of whom they were working for, or why.

Furthermore, they can tell you what you quickly can discover for yourselves: stay away from the few great cities. Because of the great urge, you, just as those veterans did, believe that only in the city can you find the power, the opportunity and the glory. Today, no matter how commodity prices improve, land values rise, or men are put back to work, the fact of the matter remains that the city is over-manned.

Ask your doctors. For every interne placed in a reputable hospital there are hundreds drumming their heels, wasting their time, trying to find a position in the city. Harvard Law Review men are trying to find work as twenty-dollar clerks. Beaux Arts prize architects of reputation and standing in their profession play checkers in their empty offices. Not a day passes that a magazine editor does not get a letter from a promising novelist, a city editor, a writer of experience and talent, willing, and pleading, for work of any kind.

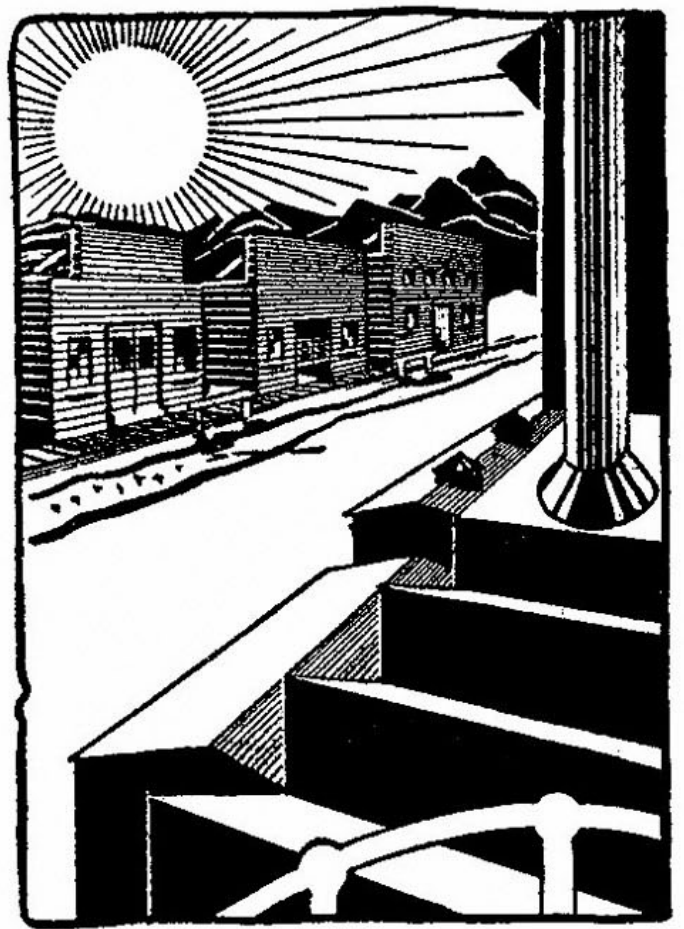
You, of course, believe the world is your apple: that with courage and ability you can do anything. That is an asset. But it is a foolish credential today in Detroit, Chicago, or New York simply because those cities are overmanned—not just because of the Depression, but because of the thousands of skilled men who rushed to the city following the Great Illusion: and today in the few urban centers for every one of you willing to start at scratch there are a hundred proved, able, even well known men, asking for the same chance.

Again I send you to your own campus veterans. Since the World War all of them had been going to the city. The great machine started to get up speed. Concentration of power, wheel within wheel of control, was just under way. The small town had limited money; old-fashioned ways; strict morals, and generally a dull life. So the doctors, lawyers, engineers, and the B. A.'s went to the city—not just for money, but because of the great urge; exactly the same, striving, inexplicable urge that caused your grandfathers to abandon their farms and move West. The timber had been cut, the iron discovered, the railroads built, when they left college—but the new super-corporation era represented another gold rush. Picked men were recruited by the hundreds to join gigantic organizations. You know that.

Talk to them, the veterans of the 20's; professional men, specialists and B. A.'s. In the great city lay money—opportunity—power. And they were right at the time—just as right as the hundred thousand who moved West a century ago. The small town was shattered by the new industrial concentration. Its light—its produce—its automobiles—its capital—its clothes—its entertainment—its jokes, even, overnight became the property of urban centers. Only the old and unfit remained at home.

Everything about the New Industrialization was youthful. A company is formed in 1922—bingo!—by 1925 it is doing a half billion dollars worth of business. Another giant takes over half the electrification of a foreign country—an engineer notes the record of the deal on the back of an old envelope! A new gadget is invented—a new company is formed—stock is floated—pressure applied—and they're off!

And the hundreds and hundreds of lads who became super-drummers, touring the country for big business in one capacity or another; all those who learned the new jargon and the routine of this super-industrialization, this whole expeditionary army of promotion, used the lingo of the frontier. They *took* this territory—they *licked* this problem—they roared in and out of commercial hotels—threw gin bottles out of windows—slept in Pullmans, cheap rooms—anywhere, for any wage.



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Boy, they were *going places*!

And it was not just the business men. Urban life, with its discomforts, its easy morals and hard drinking, was a part of the great industrial fly-wheel. The money was there for the getting. Any bright lad could, and many of them did, make money.

But talk to them now and you will find hundreds of the boys from '23 and '25 who are right back where they started. Or ask any frank corporation personnel man about employment turnover. Or talk to any young city interne. Or talk to any young law clerk. You will find, not so much confusion at wage and unemployment, but bewilderment that the zest has gone out of the game. Because they really were not going places. Because they weren't pioneering. Because they weren't resting on their own strength—they were part of the most complex financial concentration in the history of society. And the excitement fooled them, just as it did you. And now that the giant structure has had to cut down its own gears, now that the government is pumping billions into the real cultural centers of America, whose life-blood was drawn out by urban industrialization during the decade of the great gold rush, they are right back where they started.

Those who still are trying bewilderedly to go around with the big wheel are, for any profound knowledge they have of what caused the machine to run down, just where you are today, gentlemen. They are right back where they started. Except they are tired. Those hundreds who are out of work are still remembering the excitement, the urge of the city. But they have credentials—they are waiting ahead of you in line.

And you still can't believe it. You think the band will come around the corner, and the parade will start up again. I say you're deluded, but I also say you are fortunate. You're not going to have a chance to live that insane, hysterical, exciting, city life, because a majority of you are not going to find employment in the city, for all your courage and for all your effort.

And I think you are fortunate because there is a job to be done. But before I go into that, before I answer your natural question: why aren't the cities, even in scant times, the best place to start a career?—I would like to explain specifically that I do not think the private corporation, *per se*, is an engine of destruction. On the other hand, few of your older men, few of your fathers, cared to what frenzied extremes these engines were developed. Even the men running them had no conception of the ultimate influence, the very scheme—the idea—of the remote-controlled corporation—would have on the country at large. There was no check. There were no able state legislatures; no Tom Paines; no honest, or acute, administration objectors. The machine simply ran itself off the tracks.

But I don't want to engage in a discussion of finance. That is being carried on by experts. What I do tell you is that, ignorant of even the first principle of the modern private corporation, or of the tremendous changes it brought about, hundreds of your upper-classmen mistook it for a breezy frontier institution—when, by its very impersonal construction, it is a disciplinary, unindividualistic organization. And, again, I don't say that even a majority of you are interested in the corporation, or its work. But I ask you to talk to the veterans around the campus of that army of the 20's, and then, perhaps, you'll begin to understand what made the wheels go around; begin to understand what they have just learned: that the machine was built before they got to it; that they were just going around with it; that they themselves meant little, or nothing, in the life of the great era.

And so I tell you the country you think you live in does not exist. I tell you the pioneering is over. And I tell you that your job needs more than time and luck. It needs more than careless enthusiasm. It needs patience and a sobriety that comes hard to you, ignorant and unconcerned as you are with the reality of the modern world.

Up to this point I have tried to realize how strange you will feel released from college and thrust into life, prosperous or otherwise, and how you are as much

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victims of a detached, complacent educational system as you are of your own cheerful ignorance and confidence.

But I feel a measure of sadness at the extravagance of youth as it was tossed into a barren war of exploitation for ten years. Last summer I realized it, I think vividly for the first time. We were talking in Trinity College at Oxford with a few Englishmen, and stopped before a tablet in the shadowy chapel. It reached almost to the vaulted, dusky ceiling. It listed the dead from the classes of '14 to '18. More than any economic treatise ever could, it was a simple indictment of a laboring nation which has had to live for fifteen years on old veins, old bodies and old brains. The country, one felt, had been dozing for a decade, geared to the faltering pace of the old men. The young were all dead.

While we lost only a quarter of a million men, nevertheless, by a strange economic fever, your own country, particularly the great rural part of it, has been turned over to the old, the unfit and the feeble, and we are paying for it through the nose.

That is, the small town, the small city, for ten years was deserted. As truly as England, a whole generation was shot out from under it. And I can think of no better place, or way, for you to start work than to go home. Go home. Look at it, wherever it is. You will find it just as your upper-classmen left it: in the hands of the old, the incompetent and the unfit.

And I don't care what your ambition is. There is no part of home town life which doesn't offer opportunity. Your district attorney's office; the home town newspaper; your hospitals; your builders; your merchants. What do you find?

Your courts and legislatures have been content to follow their national parties, obsequiously picking up whatever crumbs the bosses tossed them. Your hospitals—God knows here is opportunity (as a government commission on medical care can well verify). Your newspaper is content to buy New York columnists and to feature articles about Chicago gangsters. Your housing is fifty years behind the times, and your merchants have long ago given over to the chain stores.

Your farms are loaded with mortgages, your banks are closed, and your state is groaning with taxes, and, having lost its identity and birthright, is feebly petitioning for Federal aid.

And you, of course, feel that all this is only an indication of how disgraceful going home must be, how imperative it is for you to go to the big city where they are doing big things in a big way. And, in a way, I think you have been cheated. There isn't any new land for you to exploit as carelessly and bumptiously as your fathers, and there is no place for you in the city. You can't start at scratch — you have to start far below scratch.



And, what will probably surprise you, you will find a pathetic group of people who are willing to listen to you. There are a great many people in your home who never thought an automobile, a radio and a shower bath constituted a high standard of living. There were several merchants who didn't know, or agree to, the manner in which the local power plant suddenly became a pin in a great utility system's load chart. There are a few lawyers who would not object to a court which wasn't conducted like a musical comedy. Most important you can find, fighting in your own back yard, a substance which the veterans of the cities never have found; you can find what they thought they were following: the great illusion of independence, of free living, of private enterprise.

Of course, there is only a simple answer to the question: how to start to work when you do go home. You've got to start by making yourself a part of it. It's a tedious, toiling job to take control away from the agencies of remote corporations, from the sterile and complacent unfit, but, after all, it's yours, and you're young and have your mistakes to make. It's an old country. But it needs reclaiming. I'd go back and take it over. And, gentlemen, I wish you luck.