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Address by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
at the
1986 Commencement Ceremonies at
the University of Maryland

Baltimore County, Maryland
8 June 1986

cover + 8pp + 0b

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unicef

United Nations Children's Fund
Fonds des Nations Unies pour l'enfance
Fondo de las Naciones Unidas para la Infancia

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Chairman Schwait,
President Toll,
Chancellor Dorsey,
Members of the University of Maryland family:

Traditionally a commencement address welcomes you, the graduates, to a world of challenge and opportunity...and promises you all the benefits and privileges which centuries of civilized progress have produced to place at your disposal.

This will not be a traditional commencement address. It will not be traditional because too many of the traditional expectations have taken a different turn in recent years.

The traditional message became especially institutionalized in the several decades since the end of World War II. Graduates of that era faced a new frontier of global dimensions - a frontier not limited to land, but to seemingly infinite opportunities for achievement, advancement, and heroics ... for conquests of space and disease and ignorance ... and for growth in economy, equity and equality.

I have a sobering message for you: it's a different world out there. It's different not only from the sheltered world you have known on campus and in your family homes. That is always the case. But, more importantly, it is a different world from that which graduates have encountered in previous decades since the 1940s. It is a different world which casts serious questions about the kind of life which you will be able to lead in the years ahead, and which you will have to offer to your children when they reach graduation.

As you, the graduates take leave of the University of Maryland, I would like to take this opportunity to remind you of two major developments which have materialized in my lifetime - and which most contributed to making the world of these past decades, and to discuss a third development which now jeopardizes the unprecedented progress which recent generations before you have enjoyed.

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The first development of which I would like to remind you is the world's greatly increased - and still increasing - interdependence which now affects most major aspects of our lives...often in unanticipated ways. Thus just yesterday morning in Rome I encountered virtually free strawberries in the markets - but eat at your own risk! Why? Fear of course, of radiation from the Chernobyl disaster more than 1000 miles away!

There are obvious examples of this interdependence, with the question of security standing foremost. The security of this country is fundamentally interdependent with the security of all nations. Even the great conflagration of World War II, when the world was far less interdependent than today, began in remote conflicts, with Japan's invasion of China, Mussolini's assault on Ethiopia, and Hitler's march into Austria and Czechoslovakia.

Obviously, any nuclear war would involve this country, and might even begin in a miscalculated dispute with a small country such as Libya, as the world came close to suffering in the 1961 Cuban Missile Crisis. And even a nuclear exchange between "only" the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. could cover the earth in a nuclear winter from which all habitation might never thaw.

Our economic interdependence is perhaps less well understood, even though we are all very accustomed to - and most of us benefit from - such manifestations of it as Japanese electronics and cars. But consider these factors as well:

-- by the late 1970s, the United States was exporting more to the developing countries than to Western and Eastern Europe, Australia and Japan combined;

-- the unexpectedly high value of the U.S. dollar in recent years increased the cost of American products on world markets, bringing near collapse to our famed - and efficient - Midwest agriculture;

-- the world's over-production of oil recently brought a dramatic drop - by more than half - in oil prices, and thus brought crisis to the heretofore booming economies of Texas, Oklahoma and Colorado; and

-- as Dan Rather reviewed the other night, a Mexican economic collapse could trigger the collapse of the U.S. banking system, which is deeply extended by loans to Mexico.

We are even interdependent in our diseases. The tragedy of AIDS in all probability originated overseas, most likely in Africa, and many of the tentative breakthroughs which might lead to its prevention, treatment and cure have come in France. Another example is smallpox. In 1968, 2 million people died from smallpox, and the United States was spending more than $100 million each year to protect Americans. By an international effort initiated by the United States and the Soviet Union, through the World Health Organization and UNICEF, smallpox was eradicated in 1978.

In the mid-1970s, a corn blight ravaged the Midwest. A corn variety resistant to the blight was found in Nigeria; great quantities of seed for

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this variety were reproduced in Mexico within 18 months, which was possible due to its year-round growing capacities; and this variety could be rapidly introduced in the United States.

We should always remember, therefore, that this new dimension called "interdependence" has both monumental advantages and disadvantages. Like "The Force" in Star Wars, it has both a good side and a dark side; its implications for us are largely determined by how we make use of it...and each of you must learn to anticipate the impact of that new dimension - interdependence - on your lives.

The second development of the past decades of which I would like to remind you is that the post World War II era is the first in human history, to paraphrase Toynbee, in which it is possible to conceive of bringing the essential benefits of progress - of civilization - to all people. This is a monumental step forward for all humanity.

Between the end of World War II and the beginning of the 1970s, for example, child death rates in the low-income countries were reduced by half - more progress than in the preceding 2,000 years - and literacy rates multiplied.

Under widely different political and economic systems, China, South Korea, and Sri Lanka have achieved - each by a strong political will - health and nutritional levels equivalent to those achieved by the United States and Western Europe only in the mid 20th century - even while still at per capita economic levels comparable to those of the West of two centuries ago.

In short, the past 40 years have witnessed such progress in technology that ours is the first generation in human history which can extinguish humankind as a species, but is also the first generation in human history which can bring major benefits of progress to all people.

The third great development is deeply intertwined with the first two. It is the global "dark times" which today threatens the unprecedented momentum toward progress for all which characterized the past decades, and greatly increases the dangers from the dark side of that new dimension called interdependence.

Perhaps you are asking yourself "what dark times?". "Yes," you recall, "things were a little tight a few years ago, but hasn't that passed? Inflation is down; interest rates are down; people are spending again."

All that is true, of course, but how deeply? And how broadly? And at what price? And aren't we still living on borrowed time?

In the past 5 years the U.S. national debt has doubled from $1 trillion to $2 trillion. In just a few short years in the 1980s, the United States has gone from the world's largest creditor nation in history to the world's largest debtor nation - the greatest reversal in history. No wonder we now

have legislation like Gramm-Rudman-Hollings - no matter how ill-conceived, unfair and unworkable - as desperate, panicked efforts are made to regain control.

The worldwide return to economic "normalcy" in the past two years has been shallow, with widespread pockets of omission, and many instances of deceptive appearances of stability. Progress on reducing infant and child mortality rates has slowed throughout the world, and in some areas retrogressed. In Ghana, for instance, malnutrition in the 1980s is up by 50 per cent to nearly half of all children, and infant mortality is up by more than 20 per cent - yet Ghana is cited by many economic commentators as a country which has "adjusted well" to the new economic realities! And in my current home city of New York, which has weathered the global recession better than most and is now said to be prospering, an increasing percentage of our children - now up to 40 per cent, 700,000 in number - live below the poverty line. Nearly half of the infants who died in New York in the 1981-1984 period have been buried in Potters' Field in unmarked graves - the children of those too poor to give their children an identity in death, much less in life.

But the need to adjust to new realities is not at question. The first half of this decade has been an "era of rude awakenings" - for countries as diverse as the United States, Mexico, Brazil and Saudi Arabia; for companies as seemingly sturdy as International Harvester, Caterpillar Tractor, Bank of America, U.S. Steel, Eastern Airlines, and many others; and for international institutions such as the World Bank and the United Nations which is now in a U.S.-precipitated financial crisis which threatens its very existence. Each has been forced to drastically alter its assumptions of what is possible, and accept very different conditions of existence.

The momentary brightening which we may presently be experiencing does not change the fact that, overall, these remain basically dark times for most countries, growing numbers of poor people on all continents, and most institutions.

But dark times need not point only to darker realities. Indeed, much of the world's most creative evolutions have emerged from darkest periods. Difficult conditions challenge the creativity of the human mind and spirit, and provide incentive for new approaches to historically overwhelming problems.

Thus, the New Deal was this country's response to the Great Depression, and brought dramatic, lasting improvements in the conditions of life for virtually all Americans; and the United Nations, the Bretton Woods financial institutions (the World Bank and the IMF) and the Marshall Plan arose from the ashes of World War II.

Are there potential areas for similar breakthroughs today? Yes, there are and there must be. The challenge for you graduates of 1986, I suggest, is to help identify and promote such opportunities, and to thus earn the personal satisfaction and the societal gratitude which were surely the rewards of the

Roosevelts, the George Marshalls, and the many other visionary heroes of those days.

Let me whet your imagination by illustrating one nascent breakthrough which affirms the fact that there are such opportunities and challenges for you to help make a reality. This breakthrough is in the area of health, where the economic constraints which prevent continued progress through steadily increasing expenditures provide the impetus for creative advances which are not dependent upon massive expenditure.

40,000 children currently die each day from malnutrition and infection in developing countries. And for every child who dies, several live on in a hunger and ill-health which will be forever etched upon their lives.

But at least half of those children need not die, and half need not be so disabled, even in these inauspicious times. Simple, low-cost (or no-cost) techniques which we now have at our command could readily prevent those deaths and disablements. These include immunization against six common diseases which take a daily toll of 10,000 children; oral rehydration therapy to counter the effects of diarrhoea which take the lives of another 12-14,000 daily; and increased breastfeeding by mothers. Universal adoption of these three measures alone could reduce the child death and disability toll by half within most countries in the next 5-10 years, accomplishing a virtual revolution in child health and survival.

These and several other major techniques are technologically easy and low-cost. We now have less-perishable vaccines which can be carried for two weeks to the farthest corners of the world - vaccines which cost 50 cents per child. We have "oral rehydration salts" - a simple solution of glucose (sugar), salts and water which can be distributed in 20-cent packets like Kool-Aid or created for a few cents from ingredients in the family cupboard. And breastfeeding is free and quite natural.

What could be simpler to save the lives of 20,000 children each day?

It's not quite that simple. You probably wouldn't know about Oral Rehydration Salts if I hadn't come here and told you about them. Well, somebody's got to tell the parents of the world about them - and convince them to use a new remedy. There's a good chance you wouldn't have gotten all of your childhood immunizations if the State of Maryland hadn't required that you be innoculated before you started kindergarten. Well, somehow we have to make poor parents in poor communities determined to bring their infants to an innoculation center or health clinic - which aren't often that accessible - for the necessary 3 innoculations at least a month apart, and which often give the children a low-grade fever. And how many of you were weaned on a bottle - rather than the cheaper, more convenient, cleaner, healthier breast of your mother - because it seemed like the fashionable, modern way to do things? Fortunately, the trend among educated, informed mothers is moving back toward breastfeeding - with all the immunological properties that mother's milk conveys to a baby. Now we have to reverse the trend in developing countries, too.

How do we do that? It wouldn't be possible at all if it weren't for the massive changes which have resulted from the past decades of development progress. And a significant part of this change can be directly traced to the "foreign aid" which the United States and other countries have contributed over these years. There has been a complete transformation - in virtually every country, no matter how poor or under-developed - in the capacity to communicate with, organize and involve the poor majority.

Virtually every village now has a school, to the point that most young mothers in their 20s and 30s can now read and write. With increased incomes, the ubiquitous radio is now in a majority of the world's homes. In most countries there is at least a television or two in every village, and frequently in many homes, with the result that people throughout a country can know what is going on and how to do things. Religious structures - whether Christian, Islamic or Buddhist - have a whole new capacity to communicate. The result is a revolution in social communications and organization - a revolution waiting to be used for good ends.

Fortunately, countries are now putting this force to work for the better. Colombia, for example, was one of the first. In 1984 the President took the lead in a pioneering display of social mobilization. All sectors of society combined efforts to immunize the great majority of Colombia's children against five major diseases then killing and crippling tens of thousands each year. The Government deployed its ministries, the army and the police into the effort. The newspapers - led by the main opposition paper - carried the message, as did the television and radio stations through 14,000 spot announcements. The Red Cross and Scouts and Rotary all took part. More than 10,000 parish priests devoted several homilies to the importance of immunization. The street vendors association was involved. UNICEF, the U.S. foreign aid programme, and other international agencies contributed support. Within a 3-month campaign, Colombia changed from a country in which only a small minority of its children were immunized, to a country in which the great majority of its children were protected. The campaign was repeated again last year with particular emphasis on the youngest children, and now the total number of children immunized is over 80 per cent, which is sufficient in most areas to provide "herd" protection. For children, this social mobilization breakthrough was the equal of man's first landing on the moon.

Similar social mobilization techniques have evolved in places as varied as Turkey, Burkina Faso, China, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, India, Nigeria, Pakistan, Peru, Egypt and many others. In El Salvador the war has been brought to a halt six times as all factions laid down their arms for each of three immunization days - "National Days of Tranquility" - last year and again this year, as people realized that more Salvadorian children died each year as a result of immunizable diseases than all the deaths from all the fighting and killing in a year.

As a result of these efforts, use of vaccines tripled worldwide between 1983 and 1985. One million fewer children died last year than we would otherwise have anticipated in 1982. One million children's lives saved.

Today, the world is well on its way in an historically unprecedented programme to achieve virtual universal child immunization by 1990 - and to save the lives of 3 million children each year.

None of this would have happened if governments and societies hadn't responded to the persuasion of those who argued that, since they had the capacity to achieve dramatic progress at low cost, they ought to have the will. And did.

None of this would have happened if governments and societies hadn't made use of their new ability to communicate with and inform and motivate their citizenry, and made available the minimal resources necessary to support the effort.

And none of this would have happened were it not for the aggregate of past and continuing efforts which brought the world to this capacity: the scientific research which developed inexpensive vaccines and simple solutions; the medical and social practices which learned how to apply them; the investments in international assistance and national development which helped create the social structures and enabled people to have radios in their homes and televisons in their villages and women's groups and farmers' groups and primary health care workers to help organize things.

This story - of tragedy among the world's children, and yet of hope ... of amazing medical advances which are as simple as sugar and water or a transistor radio ... of opportunities to defy present trends and snatch progress from an era of regression - is not a tale of distant events which holds no relevance to you. I have discussed it with you not because I simply wanted to expand UNICEF's audience, but because I see it as an example of the excitement and challenge, as well as the better, healthier life, which is indeed available to you in an era which might otherwise seem devoid of challenge and triumph.

It is not. We have been able to discern and develop these new approaches - approaches which can be even more effective than our previous efforts - because we accepted the challenge of change, rather than the consequences. We accepted that the resources available to us would be limited, but we did not accept a limitation upon what we could then do with those resources. We sought, instead, to find new ways to make more effective use of what we have.

That is not a lesson which is applicable only to the poorest of the world's poor. It is applicable in rich countries as well. I can give you a vivid example of that, too. We could spend tens of billions of dollars more on curative facilities and measures in order to add perhaps <u>one</u> more year to the life expectancy of the average American male. But that same American could add some <u>ten</u> years to his life expectancy at <u>zero</u> cost. How? By not smoking (which takes the lives of 1,000 Americans every day), by applying moderation to drinking alchohol (the second largest cause of premature death today accounting for about 1.5 million potential years of life lost before age 65), by controlling the quantity and quality of the food he consumes, and by

reasonably exercising. And the lack of a society-wide educational and motivational effort - such as Colombia's current drive for child survival - means that those with the lowest incomes and least education - those who need it most - are the ones who smoke and drink the most, who breastfeed and exercise the least, and who therefore suffer the most.

There is clearly a new frontier for progress through empowering people with knowledge, and for society to encourage people to use that knowledge through a wide variety of means.

And thus I come to you: to your role in making the possible probable.

For some graduates there is a role for you to help in identifying and improving the opportunities for breakthroughs. For those of you who continue in academic research, or those who enter any number of professions, there can be opportunities to contribute: we still need a vaccine against malaria; measles, like smallpox, could actually be eradicated; new varieties of crops and new agricultural techniques must be developed to put food production into the hands of individual families.

For most of you graduates there is a role to be played by setting a personal good example: new mothers should breastfeed, and be supported in doing so by the baby's father and by employers; smokers should stop, for their own sake as well as that of everyone around them (especially their children); we should all moderate our drinking and eat intelligently and exercise.

And there is a role for everyone in making it good politics for society to promote these kinds of measures, and bad politics not to. Real change does not come unless people demand it and society is adapted to encourage it. I should stress that the history of the civil rights movement, environmental concern, the role of women, and ending colonialism stand in testimony to this. These great sea changes in human history came orignally from among the people, who forced their governments to follow suit. And the great humanitarian efforts of the past several years - in responding to the famine in Cambodia, and the emergencies in Africa - likewise began among the people, who dragged their governments along.

I should say that the people of Maryland can already take particular pride in the leading role you have taken in meeting this challenge, especially from my perspective of concern for the world's children and international cooperation and "the good side" of interdependence. You have traditionally sent to Congress representatives who understand the American leadership role in the world, and who lead the Congress in asserting that role. Senators Mathias and Sarbannes, former Congressmen Gude and Long (and Mrs. Susie Long, who was a great UNICEF volunteer here in Baltimore!), and Congressmen Barnes and Mitchell stand among "the greats" of American leaders for a better, more humane world.

Welcome graduates. Welcome to a different world. A world in which you are called upon to explore - and to come to terms with - the next frontier. The frontier is ourselves, and that which we already have. The challenge is to make the most of it.

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