In his undergraduate days, A. Whitney Griswold was voted by his classmates as the “wittiest” and “most original” in his class.¹ After graduation, he joined a Wall Street firm but soon decided that the business world was not for him. He returned to New Haven to teach Freshman English and then enrolled as a graduate student in history, receiving the first Ph.D. in American Studies in the country in 1933. Griswold became a remarkably popular teacher and devoted the rest of his life to the University. He was instrumental in the founding of the Yale Political Union, an undergraduate organization designed along the lines of the Oxford Political Union. Though he had been against America’s intervention in World War II, once the war arrived he served as director of the Foreign Area and Language Curriculum and also directed the Army’s Civil Affairs Training School on campus. The war over, he returned to his teaching and resisted invitations to join the University administration. Rather than accept a position dealing with alumni and public relations offered to him by the Corporation in 1947, he reluctantly agreed to chair a committee to review the issue. The committee’s deliberations led to a recommendation to establish the University Council, an alumni advisory body that continues to serve Yale actively today.

When Charles Seymour reached the age of sixty-five and decided to resign from the presidency, he recommended to the Corporation the formation of a committee to survey all possible candidates. The Survey Committee made up of Wilmarth Lewis, Irving Olds, and Bishop Henry Knox Sherrill took the innovative first move of consulting with about fifty members of the Yale faculty. However, as Lewis later wrote, “Three quarters of the list were on the administrative side, deans, masters of colleges, heads of departments; a normal allotment. No prima donnas and ballerinas were on it, nor were the Olympians who dwell in cloud-capped towers. Such people are essential to the welfare of a university, but they are not looked to for help in times of administrative crisis.”² Lewis noted in his autobiography that the committee divided up the list and went singly to speak with each person.

The choice of A. Whitney Griswold was a surprise for the Yale community, but even more so for Griswold. He had never been interviewed by anyone on the Corporation to find out if he wanted or would accept the position, and was in New York on the day of his election, having gone to have lunch there with his wife and the Roswell Hams. Ham was president of Mount Holyoke College, and it was reported that after their lunch and Ham’s description of his problems, Griswold commented to his wife, “Thank God we’re not in that racket.”³

¹ Holden, 132.
³ Holden, 427.
Whereas President Seymour had chosen to be invested as President in Battell Chapel, Griswold chose Woolsey Hall as the site for his inauguration. It was a “simple and traditional ceremony” with faculty members, alumni officers, and students from all of Yale’s schools as well as the Fellows of the Corporation, University officers, Deans, and Masters of the Colleges. As noted by Reuben Holden, the only “outsiders” were the presidents of Harvard and Princeton. The mood of the modest celebration was dampened by the fact that five days earlier the Korean War had begun and an undercurrent of worry lay just beneath the surface. The spirit of the occasion is reflected in President Griswold’s comments about war and peace: “The times are not auspicious for learning. They are times of war.” Griswold also spoke of the celebratory nature of this particular moment since Yale’s two hundred fiftieth anniversary would occur just a few months after his inauguration. His comment on the timing of his inauguration has special relevance to us on the occasion of the Tercentennial Celebration. Griswold said, as the Korean War began, “If the scholars of the past had waited for auspicious times to do their work, I doubt that we should be assembled here today. If they should now wait for total war to produce total peace, I doubt that our successors will be assembled here to mark Yale’s three hundredth anniversary.”

For thirteen years Griswold served Yale and was later characterized as a “Do-It-Yourself, Don’t-Fence-Me-In” President to whom the Corporation had given a free hand. “Had he not been given it he and Yale would have suffered. When a president is as independent as he was the trustees may rebel or lose interest, but the Corporation’s delight in his gaiety merged with its admiration of his vision and drive and Yale was the gainer by its compliance.”

Tragically, Griswold died in office in 1963. He had helped, however, to bring about enormous changes in the “bricks and mortar” of the University. He wisely chose the foremost architects in the world to design the new structures. In addition, in a time of upheaval and turmoil, he was a strong defender of academic freedom. Newspaper editorials at the time of his death saluted him as the conscience of American education.

1 Lewis, 437.
A. Whitney Griswold Inauguration
Charles Seymour and A. Whitney Griswold
Ladies and Gentlemen:

We are met here today to renew the life of an old and honorable institution. In a few months we shall celebrate our two hundred and fiftieth anniversary. The “Collegiate School” founded at Parson Russel’s house in Branford in 1701 has become a great university, the second oldest in the United States, the ninth oldest in the English-speaking world. Its fame has no national boundaries. The work of its scholars and teachers is known and respected in every quarter of the globe. In American higher education its prestige and influence are second to none. This is the trust we receive here today and that our presence here pledges us to maintain. It is a great responsibility, one that calls upon each of us for the best effort of which he is capable, and upon all of us for a common sense of the direction those efforts must take.

The times are not auspicious for learning. They are times of war, and war imposes a terrible burden of proof on everything that does not directly serve its ends. Just and noble as we believe those ends to be in our own case, war and the preparation for war are not conducive to the reflective life that produces great teaching and great scholarship. The teacher senses his remoteness from his fellow men. The scholar’s thoughts stray to the battlefield. The Promethean secret of the atom breeds fear and suspicion in all our hearts, inclining us to dismiss the past, to dread the future, and to live in the present. There is indeed “no hiding place,” no fortress, and no academic cloister from which we can escape the consequences of this latest knowledge we have wrested from the gods. It seeks us all out as indiscriminately as the Roman soldier who slew Archimedes in the siege of Syracuse, not knowing who his victim was or that the scientific knowledge that died with him would not be regained for nearly eighteen hundred years.

What price the scholar’s life in times like these, or the university’s, whose purpose is to foster that life? There have been moments in which we have all asked ourselves these questions, and at certain of those moments I, for one, have found no answers. Yet I wonder if we know our own strength. The briefest glance into history shows us that we are supported by powerful traditions—not symbols or legends, but vital forces with remarkable capacity for survival. I would cite three of these traditions this afternoon: the tradition of higher learning, the university tradition, and the tradition of American democracy. Any one of these should give us courage. The three together form a tower of strength.
I do not know who first questioned the value of the scholar’s life: it may have been one of Socrates’ disciples who watched his master drink the hemlock. Surely no calling has been so much questioned—and despairs of—since that memorable event; and just as surely none has contributed so much to western civilization. What is the nature of this calling? Archimedes might have come down to us as a military strategist on the strength of the wonderful engines he contrived for the defense of Syracuse. But, says Plutarch, “he possessed so high a spirit, so profound a soul, and such treasures of scientific knowledge, that though these inventions had now obtained for him the renown of more than human sagacity, he yet would not deign to leave behind him any writing on such subjects; but…placed his whole affection and ambition in those purer speculations where there can be no reference to the vulgar needs of life—studies whose superiority to all others is unquestioned, and in which the only doubt can be whether the beauty and grandeur of the subjects examined, or the precision and cogency of the methods and means of proof, most deserve our admiration.” The scholar, says Emerson, is the “delegated intellect” of mankind. In the degenerate state he becomes a “mere thinker, or still worse, the parrot of other men’s thinking…In the right state he is Man Thinking.” To whom else do we owe our progress from savagery? To whom else do we pin our hopes of ending our periodic reversions to savagery and putting our engines of destruction to creative use? If the scholars of the past had waited for auspicious times to do their work, I doubt that we should be assembled here today. If they should now wait for total war to produce total peace, I doubt that our successors will be assembled here to mark Yale’s three hundredth anniversary.

The scholar has always had to contend with his times. As we follow him through history, how thin his lifeline appears! The dreamer, the questioner, the restless migrant between past and future, he is seldom at home in the present or with the practical men of his generation. The practical men of Athens put Socrates to death; of Rome forced Galileo to deny what he had seen through his telescope; of Berlin drove a whole generation of scholars into exile; of Moscow frightened another generation into false witnessess and quacks. Anglo-American history embraces no such violent extremes. Yet even British and American scholars have suffered from test oaths—as they once did in the early days of both Oxford and Yale and do now in California; from economic adversity, with them an occupational disease; and from corrosively utilitarian national philosophies of life.

Higher learning is innate in western civilization. Unorganized in the ancient world, it was carried on by individual Greek, Hebrew, and Roman scholars with such zeal and competence that it took European scholars a thousand years to catch up with their attainments. The phrase implies a
parallel achievement. It was not. Medieval scholars rediscovered the works of the ancients and built on their foundations. Aristotle emerges as the intellectual colossus whose writings bridge the gap and restore continuity between the two civilizations. Far be it from me to pass critical judgment on these works. But I observe that they all possess this common significance: they represent a continuous effort to free the human mind from ignorance and superstition, a continuous voyage of discovery of the human imagination. The voyage is lonely, for great scholarship is an individual experience. Often it carries the voyager onto stormy seas. Yet no explorer ever felt its urge more powerfully than the true scholar feels it every morning of his life.

Since the revival of learning that ended the Dark Ages, the university tradition has strongly reinforced the tradition of higher learning. The university has been the scholar’s home. In ways that point a fearful object lesson to us today, European civilization has been reduced nearly to their own level by the barbarians who destroyed the Roman empire. Learning, even in its most elementary forms of reading and writing, had been almost totally destroyed, and very likely would have been but for a few monasteries and cathedral schools. These kept the spark alive so that when Mohammedan scholars from Spain restored to Europe the works of Greek philosophers, mathematicians and physicians, and the Justinian code of law, there were at least a handful of Europeans capable of understanding them. Toward the end of the twelfth century, groups of masters and students banded themselves together to exploit this newly rediscovered wealth of learning, first at Bologna, then at Paris, then at Oxford and Cambridge, calling their organizations studia generalia, universitates, and finally universities. We are the lineal heirs of Paris and the two English universities.

Historians consider the universities the outstanding intellectual achievement of the Middle Ages and credit them with determining the whole course of contemporary culture and thought. With manuscripts scarce and printing still two hundred years away, the part the earliest ones played in the general diffusion of knowledge is impossible to exaggerate. But it is for their institutional character that we take notice of them here. They brought together the study of the liberal arts (grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music) with the pursuit of higher education in special fields (medicine, theology, law, philosophy). Thus they both deepened and broadened the higher learning. They deepened it by bringing this combination within the experience of a single individual, and they broadened it by making the experience available to much greater numbers of individuals. They did not attempt to cover every field of learning. That is neither the proper meaning of the word university nor, I submit, the proper policy for it to suggest to us. A group of men devoted to
learning on the highest plane of intellectual and moral integrity would be an even more accurate historical definition of a university than an institution combining higher education with the liberal arts. But it is in their institutional design that we most clearly perceive the interlocking of the higher learning and university traditions and with it Yale’s identity with the medieval universities.

I have said that we were the heirs of Paris, Oxford and Cambridge. This is true in a very literal sense, as Oxford was founded by a migration of scholars from Paris about 1170, Cambridge by a migration from Oxford in 1209, Harvard by a group of Cambridge graduates in 1636, and Yale by a group of Harvard graduates in 1701. But there is more than antiquity in this lineage. In our graduate and professional schools we continue to extend our knowledge and project our imagination to the farthest frontiers of learning and beyond. And in our college of liberal arts we continue to prepare students for service on those frontiers. The importance of our graduate and professional schools, in our own day and age, is obvious. We can imagine the chaos and retrogression that would ensue in the arts and sciences and the professions if these schools, and others like them, should close their doors. The importance of the liberal arts is, if anything, even greater. Not only are they stepping stones to the professions. Generations of students have found them the best preparation for the ordinary work of the world.

This is particularly true in a democracy. The liberal arts inform and enlighten the independent citizen of a democracy in the use of his own resources. Broadened in our modern curriculum to include a wide range of humanistic, scientific, and social studies, they appeal to the most varied and subtle combinations of taste. Yet their fundamental purpose lies, not in their specific content, but in their stimulus to the individual student’s powers of reason, judgment, and imagination. In a democracy, which rests upon the freedom and responsibility of the individual, they give that individual vision. They enlarge his capacity for self-knowledge and expand his opportunities for self-improvement. In a technological society whose working week is steadily shrinking, they render more profitable and more enjoyable the purposes to which he may put his steadily increasing leisure time. Even by the supreme practical test of modern warfare they have been judged the apprenticeship of the most alert and resourceful soldiers. They are the wellsprings of a free society.

It is in this way that the American democratic tradition forms the tripods with the traditions of higher learning and the university. Europeans and Englishmen have used their universities to train their intellectual and political leaders. We have conceived a broader purpose for higher education. This purpose regards all education as a preparation for life, and higher
education but the culminating phase of a process that should be available to all who have the capacity to partake of it. By capacity we do not mean merely intellectual competence. We mean intellectual competence tempered by character, judgment and moral responsibility. Our purpose does not assume equal capacity or equal attainment among men. It holds, rather, that if men are to be thrown upon their own, individual resources in society, society should prepare them for that responsibility, and it should not allow that preparation to be limited by anything other than the individual’s innate ability to benefit by it. This was Jefferson’s corollary to popular sovereignty, his key to equal opportunity and a truly mobile, democratic society. This was the means whereby the people could not only instruct themselves in the use of the franchise but also produce their leaders and teachers in every sphere of life. It was education in this sense that Jefferson called “the most legitimate engine of government” and of which he said, in words that stand out vividly against the Iron Curtain, “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.”

From this third great tradition Yale derives great strength. For if democracy depends upon education as its “engine of government,” the proper functioning of that engine depends upon the maintenance of standards; and in this work Yale stands, with a few—a very few—of her sister universities, *prima inter pares*. Twenty-nine million children go to school in the United States and two and one-half million men and women to college. By 1960 our school population is expected to increase to 37,000,000 and our college to 4,600,000. Is this too much education? We might as well say there is too much health. Let us admit that under the weight of such numbers quality is bound to suffer; that the statistics cover a multitude of sins—underpaid and incompetent teachers, promising students neglected or allowed to fall by the wayside, others misdirected, others carried as super-cargo beyond their proper destination, and an infinite variety of nature faking in the name of higher education. Let us say that relative to our resources—to what we could do if we wanted to—our American system of education varies as a company of infantry would vary if it went into action armed with everything from rockets to flintlocks. Still we can say that we have made the greatest effort to educate ourselves ever made by a free people, and that the hearts of our own people, and of every people in the world to whom it is given to know about it, are behind that effort.

How can we say that there is too much higher education when we think of it in these terms? Can we not afford it? We spend on higher education barely one-quarter of what we spend on tobacco, less than we spend on barber and beauty shops. Yale’s entire plant and endowment together would
not pay for two battleships like the Missouri. If our total college population should double by 1960 it would not increase the amount we spend on higher education, even assuming full employment and the consequent loss of students to the labor market, to much more than 3 percent of the total gross product of our economy.

To argue saturation in higher education is to claim perfection for hundreds of educational institutions (not excepting Yale) that are far from it. Or it is to assume a narrowly vocational purpose for higher education and discredit it by pointing to momentary gluts in this or that profession. Or to believe that every American with the requisite ability gets to college. Or that those who lack that ability are routed into other channels. If we believe that higher learning, as we have deepened and broadened it, is not only a necessary preparation for the professions but the best preparation for a full, useful, and enjoyable life in a free society, how can we deny it to any citizen who is both able and eager to assimilate it? Are the liberal arts irrelevant to a mechanic? In our modern society, his material rewards and his store of leisure time make him their natural beneficiary. No one is born to drudgery in a democracy, and if drudgery is thrust upon any of us (as it is in some form or other upon all of us) the liberal arts are its antidote. We are all voters and as such all equally in need of as much enlightenment as education can give us. As men and women living in a state of civilization, the lives and welfare of all of us are identified with Man Thinking.

These traditions give us courage for the future, no matter how black it may look from day to day. These are the things Yale lives and works for, in war and peace. They are things to cherish and defend in times of war; to fight for, when there is fighting; and to return to when the fighting is over.