I have been in your country only a short time; yet you already have made a strong and deep impression. I have flown from Pretoria to Cape Town; going back in three hours over the road which was first covered with great difficulty over many years. I went up the Indian Ocean coast to Durban; and now I return to Johannesburg.

Everywhere I have been impressed with the warmth and the interest of all of the people of South Africa, of all political persuasions and races. Everywhere I have been impressed by your achievements, the wealth you have created in this continent which so sorely needs the blessings of progress.

Above all, I have been impressed with South African youth: not just those young in years, but those of every age who are young in a spirit of imagination and courage and an appetite for the adventure of life.

President Kennedy once said that Averill Harriman, who negotiated the Test-Ban treaty at the age of 72 was the youngest man in Washington. There are many like him here in South Africa.

These young-spirited people are like young people in my country, and all over the world, seeking to build a better future – to make their mark on the tablets of history. They are restless, impatient with the past, with the vain quarrels of a day that is gone; and in this too they are more closely joined with their fellow young people than to the older generation anywhere.

And those who seek change and progress in South Africa are very special.

So many of these I have seen, so many who are in this hall, are standing with their brothers around the globe for liberty and equality and human dignity; not in the ease and comfort and approbation of society, but in midst of controversy and difficulty and risk.

Your fellow students, and men all over the world, will take heart and example from your stand. And that is why your work is so important; for men will flock to the banners of the courageous and the right; but as the Bible tells us: “If the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?”

What is the battle to which we are all summoned?

It is first a battle for the future. The day is long past when any nation could retreat behind walls of stone or curtains of iron or bamboo. The winds of freedom and progress and justice blow across the highest battlements, enter at every crevice, are carried by jet planes and communications satellites and by the very air we breathe.

So tomorrow’s South Africa will be different from today’s – just as tomorrow's America will be different from the country I left these few short days ago. Our choice is not whether change will come, but whether we can guide that change in the service of
our ideals and toward a social order shaped to the needs of all our people. In the long run we can master change not through force or fear, but only through the free work of an understanding mind – through an openness to new knowledge and fresh outlooks which can only strengthen the most fragile and the most powerful human gifts – the gift of reason.

Thus those who cut themselves off from ideas and clashing convictions not only display fear and enormous uncertainty about the strength of their own views; they also guarantee that when change comes, it will not be to their liking. And they encourage the forces of violence and passion which are the only alternatives to reason and the acts of minds freely open to the demands of justice.

Justice – a demand which has echoed down through all the ages of man – this is the second battle to which we are summoned. And let no man think that he fights this battle for others; he fights for himself, and so do we all. The Golden Rule is not sentimentality, but the deepest practical wisdom. For the teaching of our time is that cruelty is contagious, and its disease knows no bounds of race or nation. Where men can be deprived because their skin is black, others may suffer because they believe that men should not be so deprived; and in the fullness of time others will be deprived because their skin is white. If men can suffer because they hold one belief, then others may suffer for the holding of other beliefs.

Freedom is not money, that I could enlarge mine by taking yours. Our liberty can grow only when the liberties of all our fellow men are secure; and he who would enslave others ends only by chaining himself, for chains have two ends, and he who holds the chain is as securely bound as he whom it holds. And as President Kennedy said at the Berlin Wall in 1963, "Freedom is indivisible, and when one man is enslaved, all are not free."

In the last analysis, as President Kennedy told the American people in 1963, “The heart of the question is whether all men are to be afforded equal rights and equal opportunities, whether we are going to treat our fellow-men as we want to treated.”

“If an American”– or, I would add, any man – if a man, he said “because his skin is dark, cannot eat lunch in a restaurant open to the public, if he cannot send his children to the best public school available, if he cannot vote for the public officials who represent him, if in short, he cannot enjoy the full and free life which all of us want, then who among us would be content to change the colour of his skin and stand in his place?

Who among us would then be content with the counsels of patience and delay?”

It is the question before us in the United States; it is the question before you in South Africa; it is the question before all of us in every corner of the globe.

Will we – within our own countries, and among the mass of struggling humanity – use our advantages to bring help and hope to their outstretched hands?

South Africa is the pre-eminent repository of the skill and knowledge and wealth of this continent.

If you can answer the great questions – if you can sweep unjust privilege into the
dead past, if you can show the dispossessed and the diseased, the hungry and the untaught, that there is a better life for them and a fair place in the sun for their children – if you can do these things, then all of us will take heart from your example, and this continent can take its place in the modern world.

But if you cannot do these things, then your shadow will fall long across this continent – and the common cause of men everywhere. in the United States and in South Africa, will be sorely tried and deeply injured.

There are those who say that the game is not worth the candle – that Africa is too primitive to develop, that its peoples are not ready for freedom and self-government, that violence and chaos are unchangeable. But those who say these things should look to the history of every part and parcel of the human race. It was not the black man of Africa who invented and used poison gas or the atomic bomb, who sent six million men and women and children to the gas ovens, and used their bodies as fertilizer. Hitler and Stalin and Tojo were not black men of Africa. And it was not the black men of Africa who bombed and obliterated Rotterdam and Shanghai and Dresden and Hiroshima.

We all struggle to transcend the cruelties and the follies of mankind. That struggle will not be won by standing aloof and pointing a finger; it will be won by action, by men who commit their every resource of mind and body to the education and improvement and help of their fellow man.

And this is the third aspect of our battle: to fight for ourselves as individuals, and for the individuality of all.

We are patriots. We believe in our countries and wish to see them flourish. But the countries we love are not abstractions. They are not frozen in yellowed parchment and constitutions. They are not the sum total of their buildings and shops, wealth and power. We are our nations – you and me and millions like us.

A great American writer, Mark Twain, once answered that question by saying:

“What is the country? It is the common voice of the people. Each – by himself and on his own responsibility – must speak. Each must for himself decide what is right and what is wrong, and which course is patriotic and which is not. Otherwise is to be a traitor, both to yourself and to your country.”

This is the heaviest responsibility of all – a burden men have often refused by turning rule and ideology, belief and power, over to an all-powerful state. History is full of peoples who have discovered it is easier to fight than think, easier to have enemies and friends selected by authority than to make their own painful choices, easier to follow blindly than to lead, even if that leadership must be the private choice of a single man alone with a free and skeptical mind. But in the final telling it is that leadership, the impregnable skepticism of the free spirit, untouchable by guns or police, which feeds the whirlwind of change and hope and progress in every land and time.

So what President Kennedy said to the youth of America, I now say to you: That it is you who have to decide – you “who have the longest stake, you who are
the most concerned for truth, who have the least ties to the present and the greatest ties to the future.”

Here among you, at this great university, I know what your decision will be.