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"Mass Education and International Understanding"; Lecture given by James Yen, Director, College of Rural Reconstruction, Hsiih-Ma-Chang, Chungking, China; Founder and Director-General of the Chinese Movement for Mass Education.


I was in France during the first world war, some twenty-eight years ago, and I then had the chance of learning a little French; I could have delivered this lecture in French; but I have largely forgotten the language since then, and for that reason I prefer today to express myself in English. I did not think I should have the pleasure of being among you this evening, you who represent the élite of so many countries. It was during a meeting in Washington, some weeks ago, with Dr. H.E. Wilson, that he asked me to come and talk to you. I told the Committee in New York, to which I belong, of this suggestion and they warmly approved it. The view of this Committee, indeed, is that in order to promote world education and reconstruction, with a view to the maintenance of peace, everyone, without exception, must apply himself to the task. No single nation can find a solution to this problem; all must consider it together, study it and inform each other about it. For this reason the Chinese Committee for Mass Education readily appointed me to talk to you this evening.

For about twenty-six years I have belonged to the Chinese Movement for Mass Education. You will perhaps be surprised to know that this movement originated, not in China, but in France during the first world war. Chinese took part in this war on the battlefields of France; Chinese workers shared in the work of military engineering corps and in war production in France, Great Britain and the United States.

But these Chinese combatants and workers were at first very unhappy owing to their ignorance of the French and English languages. They were isolated, and received no news of their families or their country. The French and British authorities were distressed by this situation and asked for volunteers - students - to serve as interpreters for these men. In this way it came about that, two days after passing my degree examination at Yale University, I embarked for France for this
purpose. I was sent to northern France and was attached to a group of
some 5,000 of my fellow-countrymen who could neither read nor write nor
speak a word of French or English.

During the first days of my assignment they came and asked me
to read and write letters for them. This I willingly did, and soon had
hundreds of requests daily to the same effect. I soon began to wish that
they would learn to read and write for themselves. This idea, which
seems to you so natural, was not so usual among Chinese students. Indeed,
it was the opinion in China for centuries that scholars alone should learn
to read and write. That was the exclusive privilege of the scholars, of
those who read books; it was an art reserved for a small circle of
initiates. For centuries it had been the view that ordinary folk - the
people - should not and could not read; the farmer, the worker could not
and should not learn such an art. I decided, however, to try, and to
undertake the education of my men. It was my idea to form a little school,
a class where I could teach them to read and afterwards to write. I
summoned them together one day and told them that I could not continue to
read and write their letters for them. I said that in future they would
have to read and write them themselves, but that I was quite prepared to
TEACH them how to read and write. I informed them that I was ready to
become their teacher if they were ready to be my pupils. I asked those
who accepted this suggestion to raise their hands. Out of a total of
5,000, some 40 at the most raised their hands - timidly and after
considerable hesitation. In this way my first class was formed. I
organised a programme of work for four months. I gave them tests with
a view of establishing their capacity and their aptitude for learning to
read and write.

I began with very simple words and sentences. The tests were
very satisfactory. I composed pages for reading. At the end of my
programme of work 35 out of 40 of my pupils had entirely succeeded. It
was a real revolution. I brought them to their comrades and there made
them read, so as to show them the results that had been achieved.
Pupils then flowed in by hundreds, even by thousands. This experiment
in the Boulogne Camp became known, and I was asked to develop it and
apply it to the education of 200,000 Chinese workers then in France.

We then joined up with Chinese student friends - volunteers,
like myself, in France, Great Britain and the United States. We organised
in Paris a sort of seminar, exactly like your seminar here, which lasted for
some ten days. I told them of the experience I had already gained in
educating Chinese combatants and workers. Together we prepared and set on
foot a programme and scheme of teaching. Classes were organised throughout
France. The results were so good that we soon had another problem to
solve; our men knew how to read, but, apart from their correspondence, they
had nothing to read. We therefore started for them a weekly paper
entitled "The Chinese Worker". In order to print and distribute this
paper we had to exercise our ingenuity and use what methods lay to hand. I
had to draft a proof, character by character, and then have it photographed.
Nevertheless, in this way the first Chinese paper in France appeared in
1918-1919 - a paper for the workers, as its name indicated.
One day I would like to give you this detail I received a letter from a man who had been one of my first pupils; the letter said:

"Mr. Yen, my great teacher,

Since the publication of your paper, I have become a great scholar. But your paper is sold too cheaply." (Its price, in fact, was only a few centimes.) "You will not be able to continue publishing it for long. I therefore send you with this letter the sum of 365 francs, which I have saved for the purpose, so that you may be able to continue to issue the paper."

We have, properly speaking, no castes in China. But society is divided into two classes of individuals: on the one hand the educated people, who are very few; on the other hundreds of millions of uneducated men and women, the great and entirely uncultivated masses, who live a very hard and poverty-stricken life, quite different from that of the small minority of educated folk. During the 1914 - 1919 war, on the battlefields of France, these men lived side by side, day and night, sharing the same dangers; we were able to convince ourselves of their very great aptitude for acquiring knowledge; we revolted against the organisation of Chinese society which kept these men in ignorance, despite the fact that they possessed normal intelligence, that they were perfectly capable of receiving a normal fundamental education. Accordingly, in this country of France, some of us who belonged to the educated class, decided to devote our lives to the education of these masses of our fellow-countrymen, to take an interest in the fate of these tens and hundreds of millions of human beings who laboured all their life and knew nothing but continual poverty.

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That was the beginning of the Chinese Movement for Mass Education. It began in France, and for that reason I have given you all these details, which I thought might interest you.

Gradually we worked out our methods of teaching more thoroughly, more scientifically; we chose a vocabulary suitable for the purposes of the average level of pupil. I will not go into details, but will only say that the Chinese language comprises some 40,000 characters. The current language of every-day life involves the use of between four and five thousand characters. A farmer, a worker or a citizen must, for the purpose of their profession, know about 1,500 basic characters, the knowledge of which is essential for the purpose of normal professional activity. We have published dictionaries and other books containing the main characters to be learned. A programme of work has been drawn up providing for one hour's lesson each day, except Sundays, for a period of four months. This educational scheme enables the pupils to read papers, pamphlets and other publications issued for their benefit and dealing with the daily life of the citizen. Experiments and tests have been carried out in various parts of China — in the centre, north, east, south and west; technical methods have been developed and perfected. Everywhere the results have been excellent. We have a service of 100,000 teachers, all of them volunteers, who devote several hours of their time each day, without any remuneration, to the education of the masses. These teachers belong to every educational
grade — primary, secondary and university. This movement has constituted a
veritable revolution in China; it has brought together coolies and scholars.
The thousand-year-old barriers between these two social classes have been
broken down, and a truly democratic movement has been set on foot.

To fight against illiteracy was only the first step in the task
to be accomplished. We wanted to establish a complete range of instruction,
to found a true educational system. My colleagues and I considered what was
the best education to give the masses. They had to be given the essential
principles of education, so as to enable them to play their part of citizens,
in a great democracy, and to understand this part that they were playing in a
vast community of human beings. We felt that we, Chinese students and
scholars, had contracted the habit of confining ourselves too narrowly to
bookish studies, ancient works and the atmosphere of libraries and research.
Such studies are no doubt praiseworthy, but they are not enough. They keep
man too far apart from reality. If he wants to take an interest in the
masses, he must first of all study them, and for that purpose mingle with
them and associate himself with them.

Now in China 85% of the total population of some 400 to 500
millions live in the country provinces, spread out over thousands of small
villages. In order to educate these people one must get to know them,
one must live among them. There are in China about 1900 administrative
corporations, known as "CHANG" or counties. They are the basic admin-
istrative units of the country. We therefore felt that the duty of us
students, of us scholars, was not to visit libraries but to go into these
counties to see these rural populations and to get to know them. The
county is a unit very suitable for gauging results — a very manageable unit,
one might say — a convenient base for making an extensive concrete study of
the country's social and economic problems. We therefore used the county
as a trial base from the point of view of economic and social problems. We
made it, so to speak, a "laboratory for social and human experimentation".

We accordingly decided, 65 of us, in 1929 to go to a county and
begin our task. Our group consisted, in the main, of school teachers, a
few business men and bankers, officials, etc. The majority of these
volunteers had studied in Europe and the United States of America. They
had left their professions in order to devote themselves to the new object
towards which we were all striving, to the realisation of a common idea.
We had, then, in 1929 left our beautiful and pleasant town of Peking, where
we had lived for years, to go into the dusty and poverty-stricken county of
Teien-Hsien. We had to build houses; we tried to lead the life of the
inhabitants, to identify ourselves with them to the greatest possible extent.
We were in our "social laboratory", and I will now tell you of the main
problems which awaited us, and of what we were able to do.

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The problems to be solved were many and vast, but they were
connected in a general way with the following four fundamental points:

(1) illiteracy,
(2) poverty,
(3) disease,
(4) bad government.

These four questions are, in any case, allied to one another; they derive from each other.

For the sake of clarity I will take them one by one. First of all, what did we do to combat illiteracy, to spread among these peoples a minimum of essential culture? In the first place, we applied our system, which enabled them to learn to read and write in four months as a result of one hour's work a day. But we had to re- cast and re-adapt our programmes and reconstruct all our material. In order to learn the necessary technique for these rural populations, we had to create experimental schools and schools for demonstration, so that we could select adequate methods and the subjects which, preferably, were to be taught.

Six schools for demonstration were founded, in order that we could show the local populations what we wanted to do. These schools were run entirely at the expense of the Chinese Movement for Mass Education. When the populations learnt of our action, they took a lively interest in it. By degrees, hundreds of schools were established, with the result that every village in the county soon had a school, known as the "school of the people". All these schools were run, from the outset, at the expense of the local communities. The only way of developing our activities satisfactorily was, indeed, to appeal to the goodwill of the populations themselves, to interest and encourage them, and to lead them to repeat the example we were giving in our schools for demonstration.

The result was excellent, for after three years' work this movement had, of itself, developed to such a point that more than 80,000 young people, from 18 to 25 years of age, had passed through these schools. These young people, girls and boys, felt after leaving school the need of forming associations — "Fellow Scholar Associations". This was a very important point. The object of these associations was the double one of (1) enabling the young people belonging to them to develop their education yet further, to continue to learn and (2) to enable them to develop the educational movement around them, to assist in the country's social reconstruction.

Those young people's associations founded a paper called "The Farmer". At the outset, two-thirds of the articles were drafted by us and a third by the young members of the associations. By degrees this proportion was reversed, and the young people drafted two-thirds of the articles, while our contribution was restricted to a third. It was the first country paper to be founded for the Chinese farmer for four thousand years. Up till then, indeed, the Chinese farmer had had no need of reading, did not know how to read, and had nothing to read.

These school associations also introduced radio into the villages of the county. In each village, a wireless was installed in the open-air theatre, for I must tell you that in China every village possesses
an open-air theatre. In consequence, each village now also possessed a wireless. Little by little all the inhabitants acquired the habit of coming to hear broadcast transmissions in the open-air theatre.

Theatrical events were also organised; dramas and small plays were performed; at first the students performed works of which they had learnt abroad, in American or other universities; subsequently they studied the life of the local populations and wrote plays about local Chinese life. The inhabitants themselves took parts in these plays, and their interest in this form of activity was thereby increased. Theatrical companies were organised and travelled from one village to another.

This therefore, in a few words, is the general outline of the work accomplished in the struggle against illiteracy among the rural Chinese populations. The work was done in the main by the inhabitants themselves, by the farmers, and we were in most cases content simply to guide and advise them.

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Then another problem appeared. These young people, who had learnt to read and write, had educated themselves, listened to the radio, and acted in and even wrote plays, etc., soon had other ambitions. Their minds had been opened, their creative activity stimulated. They were no longer satisfied with what they had; they wanted more, they wanted to do even better. They wanted to improve their living conditions, to raise their standard of existence. It was the usual reaction; with education, the initial indifference of the individual disappears; where his attitude was previously apathetic, he reflects, observes and makes comparisons. Once his energy has been stimulated, his mind awakened and his curiosity aroused, he wants to do more; and this is the beginning of true progress. They wanted to exploit their new knowledge, to use it in order to improve their general condition. We then had to deal, therefore, with the second of the four main groups of problems with which we were confronted. We had to embark on the second part of our task. We had to open the battle against poverty. In this connection we had to deal with economic questions. We tried to improve the economic living conditions of the population of the county, that well-known "laboratory county" in which we were developing our activity.

The Chinese population is principally agricultural. We had to improve working processes and modernise agriculture, making it a less routine pursuit. The county in which we were making our experiment was essentially a cotton-growing area. We proceeded to the selection and improvement of cotton seeds; our initial efforts resulted in the improvement of the yield by 15% per hectare. Here, too, we embarked on demonstration; we sought to convince the population by means of tangible proof; we trained the workers in accordance with new working methods, and we then showed other producers the results achieved. These results impressed them, or rather they quickly came to the conclusion that we ought to do even better, since we had made a special study of these
questions; and they asked us to achieve an even greater perfection in the methods of cotton production. We trained tens of thousands of agricultural workers who were specialists in cotton-growing. Labour was educated by means of demonstrational establishments and farm-schools.

But soon we came up against another problem. Production was increasing, the farmers produced more cotton; unfortunately they derived no advantage from it, for although they had become good farmers and good agriculturists, they remained as bad business-men as before. They sold their crops at a very poor figure, and thereby lost the benefit of the increase in production. The Chinese farmer has always, in fact, been very poor; he is generally in debt because he has to borrow money to buy seeds and cultivate his land; he generally borrows at usurious rates of interest, which are as much as 35% per annum. When the harvest has been gathered in he has to discharge his obligations towards his creditors and sells his produce at famine prices.

In these circumstances we had to organise co-operative credit associations and mutual assistance funds, which would lend the farmers money at 8% per annum, a very low rate for China. This move was so successful that two years later all the local banks which lent at 35% or thereabouts had to cease business. Other co-operative organisations were created for the sale of crops; hundreds of farmers and agriculturists sent their cotton, in bulk, direct to the mills in Tientsin-Haikien, where all the great Chinese spinning factories were located. In this way the total proceeds from the sale of the crops considerably increased.

You see, my dear friends, how, from improving the sowing, we gradually succeeded in transforming the production and sale of the fruits of the soil. More than 350 million Chinese are farmers. They are dogged, intelligent and honest workers. If we can on the one hand improve their production by applying more modern and scientific processes, and on the other organise wise economic co-operation, we shall have achieved much, for we shall have succeeded in raising their standard of life. These considerations lead us to the third part of our programme of action, i.e. to the battle against disease.

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The scourge which disease inflicts upon the population of China can essentially be avoided. The illnesses in question can be prevented. For the most part they are due to ignorance, to the lack of elementary information about preventive and curative hygiene. You would be surprised to know the extent to which the percentage of avoidable illness has risen, especially in the country districts — in the case, for example, of smallpox, tetanus, intestinal troubles, etc.

There is a vast medical problem to be solved in China. This problem has a dual aspect. In the first place, public health in China is bad because of the poverty of the population. I have already told you that the groups of problems with which we had to deal were allied with, and derived from, each other. In the second place, health services, particularly medical personnel, are inadequate — notoriously inadequate. Two years ago, for example, I gave a series of lectures at the University
of Havana. In Cuba, health conditions are far from satisfactory, yet the proportion of doctors to the population is infinitely greater than in China. If you compare the proportion of qualified doctors available to the population of the United States with that available to that of China, the difference is enormous. China has only one doctor per 75,000 or so inhabitants.

China is suffering from a terrible dearth of medical and sanitary personnel. It would be thousands of years before this deficiency could be remedied and a sufficient number of doctors assembled for the needs of the entire Chinese population.

With a view to solving the problem of the battle against disease, we established in our "laboratory county" the following system: in the first place, we mobilised all the good will, all the elements which were capable of receiving rapid first-aid and medical training. In order to give first-aid or to act as a nurse or a health officer, it is not always necessary to have had very long preparation, training or experience; a quick education on the right lines can produce very good results. In this way people may be trained to render very great services.

The Chinese county is sub-divided into sub-counties, which are themselves divided into villages. These administrative units served as a basis for the health organisation which we set on foot.

At the level of the village, we established a health officer, specially trained in hygiene and preventive medicine and in the general measures for the protection of public health. This officer is equipped with a regulation first-aid box enabling him to give first-aid assistance. These health officers are volunteers; they can have other occupations, but they ensure the application of measures of hygiene and the preservation of public health.

At the level of the sub-county, we established a doctor, who is in charge of from 10 to 15 villages. In the morning he is available for consultations. In the afternoon he makes a tour of the villages and visits the sick on the spot. The sub-county is a health unit above that of the health organisation in the village and below that in the county.

At the level of the county there is a hospital, with a well-trained medical personnel and nurse.

The two reasons for such an organisation are reasons of economy: economy of personnel and economy of funds. It has allowed the most effective use of the limited personnel available. At the same time, expenses have been reduced to a minimum. The village, indeed, too poor to have a doctor; the latter has therefore been established at the higher level of the sub-county, which includes a certain number of villages. The health centre is the county, with its hospital and its complete and perfected hospital equipment. It would have been impossible to act otherwise in a poor country suffering from an extreme dearth of health personnel. This system has permitted the maximum protection of public health with the very limited resources available, and the guarantee to the population of indispensable services at the least possible cost, especially if regard is had to the
numerical importance of that population. This system has had such satisfactory results that the Chinese Government has appointed groups of doctors to the different counties, with the recommendation that an organisation similar to that in our "laboratory county" should be instituted.

I come to the last point of the programme we had to achieve, namely the question of bad government, or rather, one might say, of the absence of government.

This last point is the most delicate of all. How many people have tried to reform or re-organise government! But this problem too had to be attacked.

We had set on foot an educational programme, an agricultural programme and a health programme. For these programmes to be effective they had to be authorised and applied. But for the purpose of applying them we had, at the head of the county, only one authority, that of the magistrate, the governor of the county, who held in his hands all powers - executive, legislative and judicial. This governor, therefore, was all-powerful. But these men are generally corrupt, dishonest, and above all indifferent to social problems. Of what use was it to draw up well-thought-out effective programmes for education, agriculture and public health, only to encounter the inertia of a governor, who was nominated by the government - not elected - and was all-powerful, but whose sole occupation was to levy taxes, derive the maximum personal profit from them, and preserve order by any available means? How could these governors be interested in social or general welfare programmes, when their sole concern was to keep the people under their rod and to extract from them the greatest possible amount of money? A reform of the government in the county was therefore essential if we were to achieve positive results.

We are a movement of the people, made by the people and for the people. We had to act. Therefore sought an interview with General Chang-Kai-Shek, who received me in the most cordial and kindly manner. I told him that we possessed a table with three legs - an educational, an agricultural and a public health leg - and that we absolutely had to have a fourth leg so that the whole structure should be solid. This fourth prop was the support of the government. I asked him to entrust us, certainly not with the whole country, but with a single county, our "laboratory county" for instance, of about 400,000 souls; to let us run the risk, to entrust us with the government of that area, so that we could complete our task. The Generalissimo asked for time to consider the matter and reflect. I will cut a long story short. A year and a half later we received, at last, a favourable reply. I was appointed president of the Institute of Political Reconstruction in the county. As I was also director of the Chinese Movement for Mass Education I at once thought of combining these two functions, i.e. assimilating the political reconstruction of the county to the education of the masses.
There is a Chinese proverb which says "It is in the den of the tiger that you will find the cubs." The Chinese Government is a little like the tiger's den. One must be bold and penetrate right into it in order to extirpate the roots of evil, to weed out corruption and a lack of conscience. First of all the fiscal system had to be reformed; the police had to be reformed; the whole government had to be recast, in order that the reforms in education, agriculture and public health might be implemented. Above all, new men had to be put into the government, a local government had to be found in which the people could effectively participate.

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Friends, our programme has been carried out by and for the people, in its four great groups of problems:

- Illiteracy has been fought by popular education,
- Poverty, by the improvement of the people's living conditions,
- Disease, by the protection of public health,
- Bad government, by the installment of a government of the people.

We are a movement of the people.

Our action has gradually spread throughout all China. The universities have taken an interest in it. They have seen in it an experiment in social sciences. They have realised that, instead of locking ourselves up in studies and libraries, we have studied human beings at first hand. All the Chinese universities, Nanking in particular, have given evidence of a desire to know and examine our social and political system. They have realised the advantages to be gained from studying these problems in a real, live, dynamic fashion; they have seen that lessons learnt on the spot, in the villages, among the people, are worth more than the training of students in classes by means of abstract studies. This continual contact with reality, with real human problems, has seemed to them more fruitful than the study of books alone. This integration of theory and practice has interested the universities and contributed to the alteration of their programmes. They have sent students and educators to us to find out, more in detail, what we have done.

These results were achieved in seven years, from 1929 to 1936. The work made constant progress, but in 1936 war broke out. I was then called upon to extend our original experiments to the whole of the country. I cannot describe to you all our work during the war. I will take only one example: the Japanese attack assumed particularly menacing proportions in one area of Chinese territory. The representative of General Chang Kai-Shek, who was directing military operations in that province, came and asked me to effect the general mobilisation of the 15 million inhabitants of the region, with a view to organising total resistance against the enemy. We had already lost a considerable number of men. I replied to him, "To mobilise people, one must first win their confidence; to win their confidence, one must give them a good and honest local government, a government which is very close to them. The administrative services, the local officials must be reformed; new blood must be infused into a tired organism."
It was a radical proposal. It was accepted on one condition; that I should take part in the attempt. This I did. We dismissed the magistrates in 75 counties. We replaced them by new and, for the most part, university men, all of them keen, active, honest and in touch with the people. Higher officers were appointed and officer cadres formed.

The result was not long in coming. Three times the Japanese attacked and failed - they had to fall back in the face of the exemplary bearing of our troops and population. This splendid resistance against the enemy we owed to the close co-operation between the ranks and the people.

That gives you an idea of what we have accomplished. Your group, especially, inspired me, because of its quality, of what you represent. There is a universal crisis, involving all the peoples of the world. Everywhere the cry arises for peace. The peoples want peace, but this peace must be won and preserved. In China, we have a few old sages. One has said: "Individuals constitute the basis of the nation. If this basis is solid, the nation will enjoy peace." I would say that "the mass of individuals is the foundation of the world. If this foundation is secure the world will have peace." In order that a better world may be achieved, all men must have better conditions of life. But, in fact, these masses of men - like the Chinese people - are illiterate, have no clothing, food or houses, and are at the mercy of disease and poverty.

These problems are not peculiar to my country. Three-quarters of the inhabitants of the world are in like case. I have been to India, and the problems afflicting China are the same as those afflicting India. I have been to Cuba, and there the problems are the same - lack of food, clothing, culture and shelter, and the menace of disease and poverty. This is the common lot of many peoples. If you can imagine a family, including children, in which everything is done to ensure the well-being of one child out of four while the other three lead a miserable life and lack for everything, do you think there would be peace in such a family? Do you, then, think that peace can reign in a world in which three-quarters of the inhabitants are neglected for the benefit of a fourth quarter of privileged beings?

The United Nations Organisation, the Security Council and the General Assembly have been organised, and they constitute a wonderful apparatus; but it is only a super-structure; peace must be built in the minds and hearts of the peoples, and in the intelligence and conscience of the masses. In no other way will you succeed in establishing true peace. It is not enough to organise the world for peace; the world must be educated for it. My friends, Unesco is a great institution, but in order to succeed it must work with the object of using the resources of the privileged quarter of the world to raise the standards of the non-privileged three-quarters. All available resources must be mobilised for this purpose. I know that this will take a certain time and that it is only be degrees that we shall succeed in improving the living conditions of the masses of humanity.
Twenty-five years elapsed between the two world wars. In that interval nothing was done to build a better world. Shall we realise that we must make better use of the 25 years to come?

It will be said that nothing can be done without money. Well, President Roosevelt one day announced the cost to the world of every hour of war; do you think that if the same amount of money (10 million dollars an hour) were used for building a better world, we should not have done something useful? To build a better world, we need good leaders, men not only with great academic and scientific qualifications, but men imbued with the missionary spirit, who will sacrifice themselves completely to a noble cause. Social reconstruction is no ordinary or easy task; whoever undertakes it must have a real crusading spirit, an absolute faith. We have to fight illiteracy, poverty, disease and bad government. All our resources must be used to this end. All our experience, will and capacity must be devoted to it. We must accomplish this task within one generation.