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**Title:** "Salutatory Oration: Extent of the Duty of Obedience," by George Coffey

**Format:** Commencement Oration

**Date:** July 9, 1840

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# Salutatory Oration.

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Delivered at the Commencement.

Dickinson College.

Thursday July 9<sup>th</sup> 1840.

~~by~~  
George Alexander Coffey.

# Salutatory Oration.

## Salutation.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The time has come, which terminates the Collegiate course of the Class who will this day appear before you, and which confers on us the honors of our Alma Mater. For years we have been secluded from the world, and have passed our quiet days in learning the lessons of knowledge and virtue. We have heard not the many voices of the busy multitude, but the gentle accents and friendly counsels of our teachers; we have held converse not so much with the present age, as with the varied and silent past. Our spirits have wandered far from our own time and country, and have communed with the gifted the wise and the mighty of other days and other climes. Securely guided by our teachers, we have looked with curious eye into the bowels of the earth, with awe-struck attention we have contemplated the massive machinery of the heavens, we have peered

into the dark and teeming chambers of the soul, we have pondered those principles of right which build the throne and sway the scepter even of the Omnipotent. And now our studies are finished. We leave our retired rooms, and come forth to mingle in scenes new and various. But ere we go, those who have taught us, bestow on us the testimonials of their approbation.

Many pleasant faces are here, to greet the ceremonies of this day. The citizens of this ancient borough favour us with their presence. Our sojourn with you has been peaceful and pleasant. We have shared your hospitality and the delights of your firesides. Many a pleasant ramble have we taken through the streets of your lovely town, and amid the sweet scenery by which it is surrounded. And you are come to witness our reception of those honors, which among you we have gained. We give you a hearty welcome.

Our parents and friends are here. With fond solicitude they have observed our progress, with tender joy they have heard of our success, and now they have come to receive us from the bosom of our Alma Mater, and press us to their own hearts. Welcome, welcome our fathers and our Mothers! We will in a few short hours, return with you to our own homes. In the privacy of those homes, we will pour out our thanks for the care which watched our helpless infancy,

and the love which guards our slippery youth.

Gentlemen of the Board of Trustees:

We tender you our respectful salutation. Your care and labor has furnished the means of education, by which we have profited. A few years ago, Dickinson College was closed. Her halls were silent, her books lay dusty on their dark shelves. But now she echoes once more the student's footstep and the Professor's voice. To this change, your generous exertions have greatly contributed. And now you reap the fruits. Our College is a healthful fountain of learning and piety. May she forever flourish! And may success ever crown the action of your body.

Honored President and Faculty:

We beg leave to tender you our most respectful salutation. For a long time your gentle hands have led us by the still waters and green pastures of literature and science. You have assisted our moral and intellectual development - your kindness has directed, your encouragement has invigorated our steps. And now you are about to give us the tokens of our success in study, the honors of which you think us worthy. For these testimonials we thank you. (May we ever do credit to them, may our life be a favorable comment (on your discrimination, on the principles and opinions, which you have so carefully instilled.

## Extent of the duty of Obedience

Government is established, to restrain the passions and promote the comfort of mankind. In order to protect the weak, curb the strong, and give efficiency to combined effort, men bind themselves together by law. And as law addresses our fears, persons are chosen to carry out its sanctions and requirements who are invested with the power of punishing offenders and of directing the energies of the governed. They call levy war, raise money and demand assistance in applying the laws. And those for whose benefit they act, yield them obedience. This obedience is necessary, for without it law would be of no effect and government would be useless.

But although when government is doing its duty obedience is beyond all doubt proper, there may be occasions when it is not proper. Under some circumstances, we may not be bound to submit to rulers, who trample on law and oppress the people. But under what circumstances should obedience end? The dissolution of government is attended with so many evils, that a nation should be cautious about resolving itself into a state of anarchy. In general it is better to endure the evils of arbitrary power, than to groan under the horrors of a lawless revolution. Necessity alone, should impel

now to destroy the most complex, and most valuable of human institutions — The duty of obedience loses its obligation, only when rulers have departed from their lawful functions.

But the people may have certain powers by the use of which they may protect themselves, and bring back public officers to their duty. Such powers are reserved in every constitutional government. The Romans & Athenians could reject those laws which were framed by their Senates. The British House of Commons, enjoys the exclusive privilege of imposing taxes, and of granting supplies to the Sovereign. In our Union, the ballot box is a security against flagrant official misconduct. When the constituted authorities violate the laws, then the people should seek first legal remedy. And if legal remedy can be found, they have no right whatever to disobey. For a legal remedy implies conformity with, that is obedience to law, and of course obedience to those who are its administrators — obedience to rulers — and common sense teaches that the correction of governmental abuse without annulling the obligation to obedience, is infinitely more consonant with the happiness & stability of society, than disobedience rebellion and their invariable attendant civil war. The idea is popular, that when rulers do wrong, the ruled are released from all ob-

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it received with avidity. But it is a false doctrine. If a  
people wish to preserve their municipal regulations, ought they  
to set at naught those very regulations which it is their ob-  
ject to keep in full force?

In a representative government, the number of legislators and  
the circumstance that by the frequency of elections they are  
amenable to their constituents, are sufficient to defend every  
popular right. Could our National executive invade  
the Constitution and not be hurled back by our 242  
representatives? Has a Cabinet, naval or military officer  
ever yet eluded the vigilant eye of Congress? Had a short  
time since, were not the secrets of the Treasury Department in-  
vestigated by a Committee raised on mere suspicions?

And if the Legislature leave its proper sphere the Legis-  
lature can be purified at the ballot boxes. Should it  
become a tool of the executive the people can cast from  
office, President & Congress. Should attempts be made to tam-  
per with the purity of elections, such attempts could be crushed  
by the Judiciary. And judicial fairness, can be secured by the  
life tenure, the legislative power of impeachment, and the trial  
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peaceable assemblage, the freedom of speech, & debate in the legislature  
are strong & impregnable bulwarks of liberty.



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If then the people have legal means of protection they should keep public officers in the path of duty by those means. And every legal means every authorized way, suppresses the continuance of obedience to government, for otherwise why would popular powers be received, why would constitutional checks be invented? What is a constitutional check? Power left in the hands of the people, or their agents to restrain without disobeying their rulers -

It would seem, that in a constitutional government, there never can be any occasion for disobedience. But in a despotism, the people may vindicate their rights by rebellion. They have no privileges whose use will enable them to resist tyranny - their law is a despot's caprice their protection must be the sword. It would be proper for the Russians or the Chinese if circumstances were imprudent to refuse allegiance. But if a Frenchman an Englishman or an American, were to disobey his rulers, he would be a base rebel. He would be a violator of his country's constitution, which declares by its grant of privileges, that no one must ever refuse submission, to those appointed to fulfill its provisions.

The doctrine that our Americans may under some circumstances rebel, is fraught with evil - Its tendency is shown by scenes which have been enacted in this Union not long ago. Infuriated men have been ready to tear in pieces, old and valuable usages, merely because in their opinion officers departed from the spirit of the laws. They would not consider that all their desires might

be satisfied by the elective franchise, by the courts of Justice -  
No. They acted as if their magistrates possessed the power of an  
autocrat, and as if they were a set of thrall'd bondmen -

Such conduct is suicidal; resistance to regular authority  
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tyranny.

George Alexander Coffey  
Huntingdon County  
Penn<sup>a</sup>

Commencement Oration of George Alexander Coffey, Class of 1840  
Transcribed by Sarah Skalak, June 2008  
Edited by Tristan Deveney, July 2008

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