

Commencement Choice: Dr. Who?

On June 7, 1947, a speaker at the Harvard Commencement unveiled a plan to revitalize Europe in the aftermath of World War II. The speaker was Secretary of State George C. Marshall. The plan was the Marshall Plan, officially called the European Recovery Program.

Forty-nine years later, the Commencement Committee has chosen Dr. Harold Varmus, Director of the National Institutes of Health and a recipient of the Nobel Prize. Varmus is credited with demonstrating that cancer genes, or oncogenes, can arise from normal cellular genes. Although we acknowledge Varmus's accomplishments as a brilliant researcher and recognize the advances he has made in science, we are disappointed that someone who is better known or has had a more visible impact on the world was not selected.

It's not that we object to scientists *per se*, but Varmus doesn't seem to be of the same caliber as others representative of this field. Commencement is a time of excitement, and now many seniors are disappointed at the choice of a speaker whose name they have never heard. We understand that the University has a great deal of funding at stake in terms of grants from the N.I.H. We hope that this factor has not influenced the committee's selection.

The current selection process run by the governing committees is extremely secretive. To avoid this situation in the future, the Commencement Committee should include a student representative. With student input into the final decision, the committee might not select a speaker with whom so many are disappointed. After all, it is the students' commencement. It would be appropriate to give them a role in choosing the keynote speaker.

Although we do not disapprove of the choice of a scientist over a head of state, we wish the committee had chosen someone a little more glamorous. Granted, we don't expect anything like the Marshall Plan at the 1996 Commencement, but the choice of Varmus is a let-down compared to recent speakers Czech Republic President Vaclav Havel, Vice President Al Gore '69, former Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell and Nobel-prize winning author Alexander Solzhenitzyn. Even though an organizational change within the Commencement Committee would not benefit the Class of '96, it would prevent future classes from being disappointed at their own commencement.

DISSENT

Varmus is Substantial

We agree with the theme of today's editorial that students should have a role in helping choose the commencement speaker; student voice is lacking all too often from decisions made by the administration. However, we feel that the choice of Varmus is very timely. He promises to be an interesting speaker. At a time when our country is discussing such important issues as health care, and when threats of funding cuts to basic and clinical medical research abound, Varmus makes an excellent choice since he can discuss issues which will directly affect us all in the very near future.

In addition, as an increasing number of Harvard students choose to concentrate in the natural sciences each year, we feel that the choice is in keeping with the pulse of the student body. Finally, the very nature of scientific research prevents it from staying in the public eye with consistency, unlike the work of politicians mentioned above. Varmus is as distinguished in his field as most past commencement speakers. We should admire substance, not "glamour" in a speaker.

4/10/96

—Anne L. Brady '98
Justin D. Lerer '99