Ladies and Gentlemen:

I welcome the opportunity of being the first speaker in this Parkland Conference and my theme which I shall keep coming back to is this: that the character and beauty which we strive to preserve in this city and Commonwealth too often have disappeared before we citizens ever knew that it was threatened.

The American elm is a New England character. It used to shade the oldest house; its wine-glass silhouette is a landmark in any meadow; its branches make a summer cloister of famous streets in Salem, or Williamstown, and with the lilac bush it is the last guardian of the deserted farm. Rightly it is called the Patriot Tree, for under its boughs treaties were signed with the Indians, Washington took command of his Army; George Whitefield, the evangelist, preached to thousands on Boston Common; and under it came the rushing embrace of the home-comings after Appomattox. The sight of an old elm makes you feel younger and, for the moment, surer that good things last.

A century ago in the Atlantic the "Autocrat of the Breakfast Table," Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, sent out a call for someone to do the biography and the photographs of the oldest elms in New England, and in time the book appeared with superb plates by Henry Brooks, and the text by Lorin L. Dame. This big folio entitled Typical Elms and Other Trees of Massachusetts is a rarity today. Every tree in it was more than a century and a half old, and what beauties they were: elm, oak, ash, tupelo, and the great chestnuts which Thoreau used to measure with two-and-a-half spreads of his arms. Chief among them was the elm, known as the Great Tree; it was planted in the Common about 1640, and it suffered from its first major cavity a hundred years later; a tree dentist in 1740

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1 An address presented at the Parkland Conference, sponsored by the Trustees of Reservations, in Boston, May 24, 1967.
2 Boston: Little, Brown, and Company. 1890.
cleaned out the rot, filled the cavity with "clay, and other substances," and then bandaged it—yes, bandaged it—with canvas. The big beauty lived on until February 1876, for a total of 236 years, and when the winter gales finally destroyed it Bostonians rushed to the spot and took home slabs and cuttings for table-tops and chairs.

The Dutch elm disease was not man made, nor was the blight which exterminated our chestnuts, but the fact that one of these splendid species is now extinct and the other dangerously threatened should make us more intent to preserve the good trees we have. But has it? Not that I can see. The elms at the southern extremity of the Boston Common are diseased and dying; they should be cut down and healthy ones planted in their place. In the Public Garden we have lost many of the rare trees planted there by Frederick Law Olmsted; the replacements are commonplace willows. On Commonwealth Avenue we should have a second growth to preserve the magnificence of the Mall when the elms there go. Whose responsibility is it to care for the life of our trees?

The beauty of our heritage and the skill with which we are planning for tomorrow make Boston one of the four most visually-exciting cities in the U.S., the other three being San Francisco, New York, and Washington. Let me signalize the things which have made this so, beginning with the Park Street Church, the most beautiful single building in the center of town, and the one which continuously attracts the eye. Next, Saint-Gauden's monument in memory of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, unquestionably the finest of all our city monuments. The Boston Common, the most vital and historic city Park in the nation, and across from it the Public Garden at this moment with its regiments of tulips and fruit trees in blossom in its prime. The Bulfinch State House, and close by the whole splendid monument of Beacon Hill. Then the North End, so different with a warmth and style all its own, as is well seen on North Square; it is the oldest part of our city to be in continual residence, and we must thank the Bostonians of Italian heritage for giving it the good restaurants, the friendliness, and safe streets, full of children, which are its character today.

Go to the Arnold Arboretum when the azaleas and lilacs are ready; go some late afternoon to the Fenway for the vitality of the gardens and the vista of the Museum; and if you love trees as I do, seek out those two giant elms on Branch Street which must have been planted when the Mt. Vernon proprietors were building Federalist Boston, and which are, I believe, the two oldest elms in the city today.

Finally, go at any time of night or day to the Charles River Basin, the most satisfying modern concept in our city and one that has not yet been destroyed by the automobile.

High rise of glass and concrete can be built anywhere; it is these things I speak of which rank Boston with the three other cities I cited. And how do we compare?

How are we keeping things up? Look at Park Street Church, for instance. Not long ago the ugly rumor reached me that the proprietors of the church were considering the possibility of an eight-floor office building erected so close to the church that it would cover the rear portion. This is one of those disappearing acts that could happen before any of us were the wiser, and what a shame it would be! Or consider the Shaw Monument directly facing the State House, the Monument which should have
such significance in our struggle for civil rights, the Monument which more tourists look at than any other in the city. For fourteen months it has remained in disgraceful condition, the figures streaked and defaced, the sword in Colonel Shaw’s hand twisted and broken away by vandals. The same apes have torn the sword from Washington’s monument in the Garden, and nobody gives a damn! I fail to understand why Boston takes such little pride in its best things—why it is not the responsibility of someone to restore our elegance. Our streets, whether in the Back Bay or on Beacon Hill, are so filthy with papers and beer cans that I should be ashamed to compare them with the residential streets Mayor John Lindsay has cleaned up in New York. As for the pollution of our nearest water, you only have to smell the Charles to know how foully we compare with Washington in that respect. The beauty of Boston Harbor was once known from here to Shanghai. If that shambles can be restored by Mr. Pei and Edward Logue, we shall be deeply in their debt.

But what about the canopy overhead? By any measurement our air ranks Boston as one of the ten dirtiest cities in the nation. Isn’t it a luxury to talk about preserving the beauty and character of the city when the air we breathe, the milk and water we drink, the land we love is as polluted as it is in this Commonwealth? The problem of pollution nation-wide is appalling, and the worst thing about it is that it is all man-made, made right here in the U.S. We are all to blame. The pollution from our automobile exhausts and factory chimneys, the industrial waste which fouls up our streams, the accumulated lethal acids which run off the land into our ponds and lakes, for these we have only ourselves to blame.

It sometimes seems to me as if our scientists worked in hermetically sealed cells intent on one-half of an equation and never counting the cost. Having perfected pesticides which could be dusted on our crops and DDT sprays which might bring momentary protection to our trees, it seems never to have occurred to chemists that what they were pouring over the land and forest could not be dissolved in water and would grow more lethal in its poisoning as it passed through each living organism. One wonders if the sludge now accumulating in Lake Erie will grow to the point where even ice-breakers can no longer penetrate it.

The best we can do about pollution locally is to join up into teams of vigilantes with two objectives in mind: to clean up and protect the neighborhood for which we are responsible, and to set aside in our own domain more of the open places and wet lands, more of the woods, and what the English call the “green lungs” which our grandchildren must have in the future. This was the original and driving purpose of the Trustees of Reservations; it is something that the community can do better than the state, and indeed, better than Washington, unless of course the project proves to be as large as the Cape Cod National Seashore Park.

I think we should celebrate those communities which are taking the initiative. I think that in January the Governor ought to cite each community which has carried to completion a major project

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Respectively, Mr. I. M. Pei of I. M. Pei and Associates, Architects, and Mr. Edward J. Logue, Development Administrator, Boston Redevelopment Authority.
in Conservation. High on any list as this moment would be the town of Dennis, which at a recent town meeting voted $625,000 with which to purchase 1700 acres adjoining the town; 1700 acres of beach, uplands, and salt marsh taken out of reach of hit-and-run contractors, to be enjoyed in perpetuity by the people. Where can you do better than that?

I think the towns of Lincoln and Concord should be cited for their vigilance in zoning, for protection of their trees, and taking such pride in the health of their marshes and wet lands. I think we should cite Bedford for the long, patient work they have done in cleaning up their share of the Concord River. Credit should go to Framingham for its unique Garden-in-the-Woods, and for those who have built up the quarter of a million dollars which will fortify it for the future. And to Salem great credit for preserving the glory of Chestnut Street.

Now coming back to Boston, wouldn’t it be wonderful if the powers that be in the State House could be persuaded to invest in the depollution of just one famous Massachusetts river? It might be the Charles; it might be the Concord; it might be as ambitious an undertaking as the Merrimack. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania was not afraid to clean up, to depollute miles and miles of the upper reaches of the Schuykill. Why should we sit on our hands?

A famous Canadian and a bold conservationist, Roderick Haig-Brown, has proposed that all existing pollution of air, land, or water should be taxed in proportion to the demand it makes upon the resource. “All pollution,” he says, “is the use of public property for private profit. It can be most accurately measured at its source and it should be taxed.” Well, why not? Too often the attitude of the authorities is how much pollution can we get by with short of causing a disaster; how much of the cost of industry or settlement can we shove forward to be paid by the next generation. But if we had a pollution tax that could be graduated so as to insure the maximum elimination over a period of years, what a God-send it would be.

—Edward Weeks, Editor
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