

TIME

THE WEEKLY NEWSMAGAZINE

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Principal office Rockefeller Center, New York, New York
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TIME, JUNE 23, 1967

A letter from the PUBLISHER

James R. Shepley

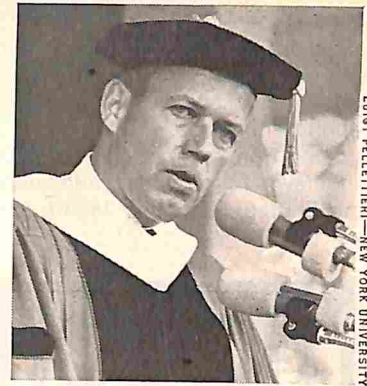
"I AM not sure the subject is being
taught today at any major Amer-
ican university. I am speaking of the
ability to be wrong."

That ability and how to achieve it
were the theme of a commencement
address delivered by Editor in Chief
Hedley Donovan, a trustee of New
York University, to N.Y.U.'s gradu-
ating class. It is not, Donovan ad-
mitted, an easy subject to master:
"All it takes is courage, honesty, self-
respect, grace—and sometimes a
sense of humor helps."

Perhaps a year or two from now,
suggested Donovan, it will become
clear whether the U.S. policy in Viet
Nam will ultimately fail or succeed.
Either outcome will bring about "a
kind of crisis of integrity in which
powerful and influential people will
have to consider the possibility of
saying out loud that they were wrong.
Many of them have never tried it be-
fore, and it would not come easy to
them. But if they cannot bring them-
selves to it, I think the American
intellectual climate and the whole
tone of our politics could be em-
bittered for years.

"Journalists have never been no-
toriously eager to acknowledge their
mistakes," said Donovan. "Many
have perfected a smooth way of tak-
ing a new position without ever not-
ing that they once held quite the op-
posite view." As for professors,
"surely everyone would agree that
the people who should be first and
frankest in admitting error would be
the academic intellectuals, with their
totally disinterested dedication to free
inquiry. But the recent record is not
reassuring. Perhaps it will be this gen-
eration of university graduates, your
generation, that could teach Amer-
icans how to be wrong.

"I know many students have felt
deeply, and spoken up strongly, on
Viet Nam. Some of you will turn
out to have been wrong. It is in the



DONOVAN AT COMMENCEMENT

way you react to that moment, I sug-
gest, that you will get a chance to
take another stand—in behalf of a
mature and civilized style of public
life in America. How to be *right* is
something of an art, too, and some
of you will get a chance to show
your skill at that, when the Viet Nam
results are finally in. How to be right
in ways that make it a little easier
for the people who were wrong to de-
cide that they were wrong, and make
it easier for all of us to turn togeth-
er to a fresh agenda.

"Looking ahead to that time, we
might perhaps begin even now, with-
out in any way restricting the Viet
Nam debate, to let a certain meas-
ure of modesty and generosity into
the dialogue. As to what will or won't
work in Viet Nam, we might begin
by admitting that we are all to some
extent guessing. Nothing is guaran-
teed. So far as the morality of the
policy is concerned, we might do well
to credit all parties to the debate with
decent motives and a normal sense
of human compassion.

"The incredibly audacious thing
that a few million people in South
Viet Nam—and we Americans—are
trying to do, is to defend not so much
a nation as the possibility that South
Viet Nam can become a nation. It's
a very tough proposition. We may
fail. If so I hope that I, as one who
has supported the policy, will be
prompt to admit that we had attempt-
ed something beyond our powers. But
you know, we may just succeed. And
if that happens, I hope that the many
thoughtful, dedicated Americans who
opposed the policy will be glad to ac-
knowledge that their country is some-
times capable of even more than we
should dare to dream."

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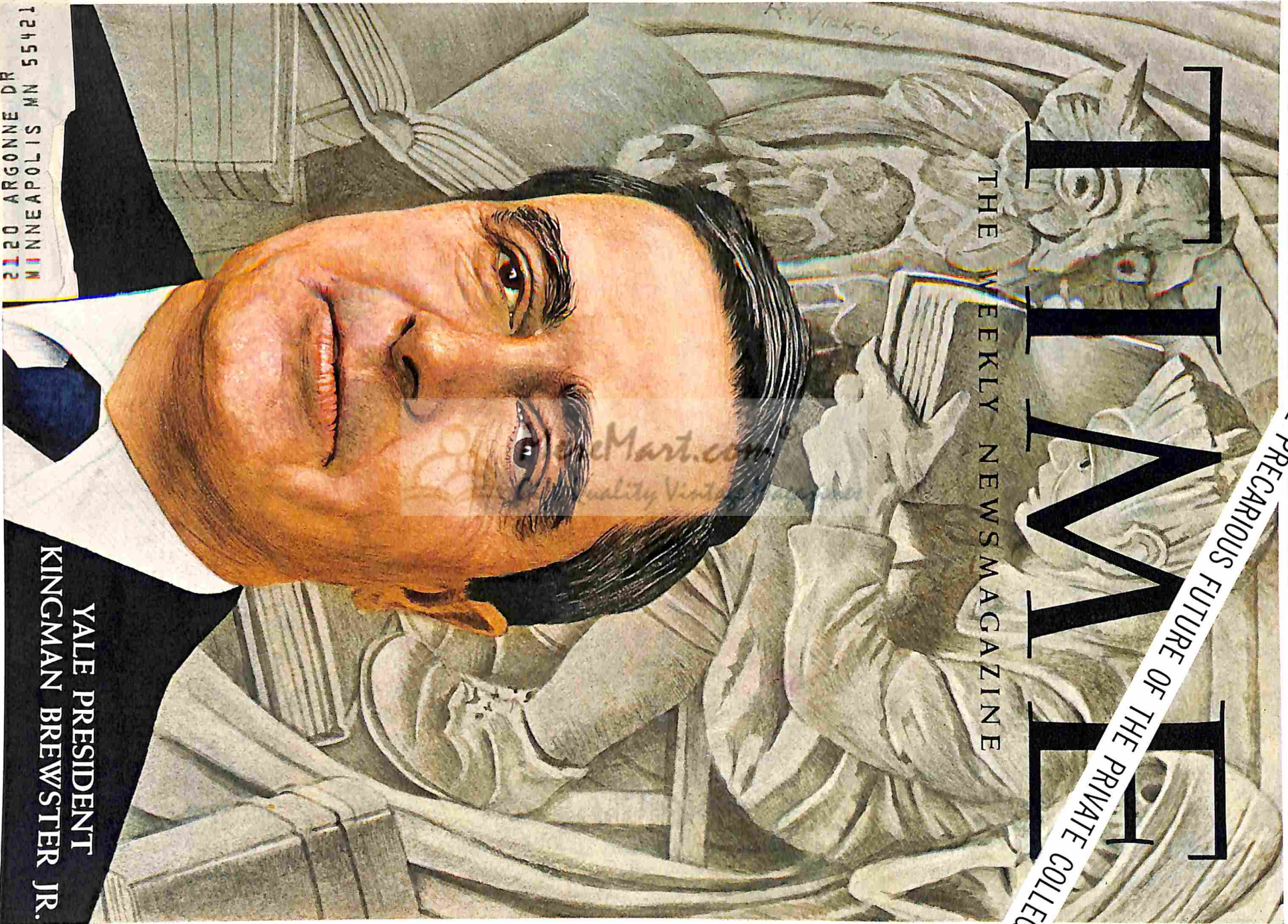
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JUNE 23, 1967

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THE WEEKLY NEWSMAGAZINE

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VOL. 89 NO. 25
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