



# High School Graduation

June 7, 2009

Speech by Ron Klain, Class of 2009

Thank you Peter for this invitation to speak.

Before I begin, I want to offer some “thank you’s” on behalf of the parents of the Class of 2009. To Kevin and Tom for their incredible leadership of the High School; to the college counseling team of Chris and Bobby and Barbara, who helped this class achieve record-setting results in a year of record-setting competition in college admissions; and most of all, to the best high school faculty in America, who have given our children a mind-opening, perspective-changing, thought-provoking, worldview-bending, paradigm-shifting, Morris Dancing, education — all on a first-name basis.

Today begins a happy but a hard summer for most of us parents. For as fall approaches, it is not only our own children to whom we must say goodbye, but also, so many more of you whom we have gotten to know. Like many parents, we will miss our daughter’s friends because, unlike our own children, they are polite to us, and they tend not to leave their things strewn about our home. And so, to Hannah’s friends—Sari and Sarah; Lauren and Lindsay; Ashley, Rachel, and Chelsea—girls, you will be missed by Monica and myself, but most of all, by Hannah’s younger brothers, who ask that as you go off to college, be sure to send back pictures.

The job of a great graduation speaker is to dispense life-changing advice, and do it in under 10 minutes. Today, I’m only going to hit one of those two goals. For I’m afraid that—after much thought—the best advice I can offer the Class of 2009 is this: No matter what comes next for you, however far you go with your schooling, however many more graduation days you enjoy, follow this one simple rule: Never, ever take the advice given to you by a commencement speaker over the age of 40.

Fortunately, there is little risk that you will violate this rule, since 99% of graduates forget what their commencement speaker has said less than an hour after graduation is over. My high school commencement address was given by a local official who, a few years later, was

arrested for conducting an illegal gambling operation. I don't remember exactly what his speech said, but we probably should have been more suspicious when, after telling us that we should "take chances" in life, he added "and if you do, the odds are 5-to-1 that you will succeed."

But as I see it, there are three principal reasons why you should never listen to a commencement speaker's advice, above and beyond the risk that the speaker might turn out to be a felon.

First, the unpleasant truth is that adult commencement speakers have lived their lives in "the past;" while you are about to go live your lives in "the future." Everything we know, everything we have learned, everything we have experienced is from a world that is no more; everything that you will experience is in a world that is yet to be. We see world events colored through the prisms of the U.S.–Soviet conflict and Watergate; but your understanding of the world will always start with 9/11 and the election of Barack Obama. Our understanding of friendship and romance comes from a time when we wrote letters that took days to arrive, and stared nervously at a box we called a "telephone" in the hope that it would ring; but your understanding of connection comes from a reality where you can text, video chat, instant message, facebook chat, and blackberry message anyone, anytime, anywhere on planet Earth.

For the Class of 2009, today's technology will change everything about your lives—except, probably, how often you phone home from college. But it is not just technology that has changed. If someone had stood up at my high school graduation and said that, in my lifetime, we would see a black President, a Hispanic woman nominated to the Supreme Court, and same sex couples being married in Iowa, they probably could have gotten very good odds from our bookmaking commencement speaker. Yet the Class of 2009 has seen all these things happen—not just in your lifetimes, but before you finished high school. What's more, many of you—through social action, through volunteering in the last election, through your community service, have helped bring these changes about. What could we possibly tell you about your future in a world that so many of you are already doing so much to change

The second reason why you should ignore advice from over-the-hill Commencement Speakers is that—in addition to our having lived in the past—we have an odd attachment to the past, and a horribly misguided sense that somehow "the good old days" were a time when "everything" was better. A small example serves to illustrate. One day, my wife was bemoaning to our

children how much “better” music was when we were teenagers, being less coarse with fewer references to drugs and sex. But our kids, having heard this speech before, fired back. “But Mom,” they answered, “isn’t it true that when you were our age, your favorite group was The Doobie Brothers?” And then, adding insult to injury, they said, “And back when you and Dad were first dating, wasn’t your favorite song Afternoon Delight—and that wasn’t a song about having milk and cookies after school, was it?” So much for the purity of the past.

More seriously, the point I want to make about every generation’s attachment to its own youth is this: notwithstanding all the challenges the Class of 2009 faces as it enters the world today—economic problems; the risk of terrorism; a global environmental crisis; and more—notwithstanding every other obstacle that you will have to overcome, the arc of human progress teaches us that the world that you, the Class of 2009, will build for yourselves and your children will be more prosperous, more fair, more humane, more peaceful, and more just than the one in which your parents have lived. The famous saying “those who do not know history are doomed to flunk Richard’s class. I mean, the saying: “those who do not know history are doomed to repeat it”—is not a call to learn from the past so you can replicate what we have done, but rather, a suggestion that you learn history so you can do things differently. So for goodness sakes, don’t listen to us—except to learn what we did, and then do the opposite!

Which brings me to the third reason you should never take advice from Commencement Speakers: because any lessons that we have learned are not the product of our successes but, rather, came from the things that went wrong and the things we never saw coming, from our mistakes and our failures. When I was a high school senior, I wanted to go to Harvard for college. I got rejected, and set off, disappointed, for Georgetown. And yet it was at Georgetown where I got my start in politics—working on Capitol Hill part time during school—and where, most importantly, I met my best friend, who now, 30 years later, is still the love of my life.

I have seen this pattern time and again. I found my first job working on a Presidential campaign because I was forced into a job search when the Senator I was working for was defeated. Decades later, it was the lessons that myself and others learned from electoral defeats—not victories—that shaped our contributions to Barack Obama’s successful campaign in 2008. As my old boss, Vice President Al Gore, said on the night he conceded the Florida Recount, “defeat can serve as well as victory to shape the soul and let the glory out.” The lessons that should guide you in life are not the tales of success that a commencement speaker shares, but

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rather, the failures and disappointments that you yourselves will suffer along the way.

So I've come to the close of this speech with no real advice for the Class of 2009, other than the advice that you should ignore any advice that you might get in a speech like this one. I do, however, have a simple plea for the graduates. Your parents have given you a gift of an education at GDS that far surpasses the start in life that ninety five percent of us had when we were kids. We ask only one thing in return. When you leave for school, email us, text us, IM us, BBIM us, FBIM us, tweet us—but as my own mother had to recently remind me, none of those electronic communications substitutes for the need, at least once a week, for us to hear your voices on the phone. Because as much as we enjoy your text messages and your online photos (at least the ones you let us see), you should never forget that from the time you first screamed your first cry after birth to the day you first said, “look at me, Mom and Dad,” at a dance recital or a soccer game to the time, freshman year, that we were first able to pick out your voice out above the din of the GDS forum to that moment last week when we heard you say your final farewells to your friends in the gym on senior night, it is the sound of your voices that has been the joy of our lives, and that we will miss the most this fall.

Congratulations, Class of 2009.