



High School Graduation

June 10, 2018

Speech by Cecily Davis, Class of 2018

Hello '03 — Congratulations to all of you. For all you've learned, all the fun you've had — and the friendships. For all you've achieved; and all you will achieve in the future. It is a commonplace to say that it is a privilege to be here, but in this case it is very true. However I must admit that if Peter had told me when he called about the fabulous faculty and student acts I would have to follow I'm not sure I would have agreed so readily.

I understand that I'm speaking here today as a parent, and though I wouldn't presume to speak on behalf of that august body, I hope there is one point on which I can speak for all of us, and that is in thanking your teachers. All the way back to pre-K, they have worked enormously hard, and cared tremendously. They have understood that education is not filling a bucket, but lighting a fire. More than any faculty I've encountered, either as a student or as a parent, all of them, all of the time, have made it clear that their goal every day is for each of you to succeed. For all of that, we parents would like to say a final, heartfelt - deeply felt - 'thank you.'

I can remember as though it were yesterday an experience many of you will have in a few months, the opening convocation in my freshman year at college. The president of the college, who was a scientist, spoke on the subject of the importance of going to graduate school. Now you have to understand, that I was metaphorically hunkered down, staring at a vast plain that stretched seemingly endlessly ahead of me. It was studded with great mountains with names like 'Organic Chemistry', and 'Thermodynamics' and 'Quantum Mechanics'. Even 'Freshman Writing' loomed very large. As far as I was concerned, it was only a matter of time before someone discovered that there had been a terrible mistake and that I didn't belong there at all. In short, you could say that I was pretty terrified about getting through college, and that graduate school was close to the last thing in the world I wanted to hear about.

As I walked back to the dorm, I asked myself angrily how someone whose job it presumably was to know how students felt, could have given such a wildly inappropriate speech. She must have been crazy I thought. Well, I crazy like a fox, because I certainly don't remember any other such

formal occasion from those years, and yet I surely remember that one.

In just the few minutes that I have, I want to do something that may feel to some of you a bit like that talk felt to me. I hope not, but if it does, perhaps for a few of you, the thoughts will linger and make a difference as Polly Bunting's words did to me. Because what I want to do is to leap over not just college, but your entire formal education, and talk for the few minutes I have about the world you will inherit when your formal education is complete - whenever that may be.

You will be leaving school and beginning your careers as your country faces a brand new challenge for it. For the first time in its history, the U.S. has both global interests and overwhelming power unlimited by any peer competitor. Always before, we have had either much narrower interests, much less power, or both, or faced a serious threat in the shape of the former Soviet Union. What we have now is brand new for us and history tells us that it is very dangerous terrain. In a word, what we face is the challenge of managing dominance.

We should note, to start with, that there probably has never been a power that dominates the global system as we do. Britain ruled the seas and its colonies, but not the globe. There have been a few previous attempts to achieve hegemony - dominance over all nations - since the beginning of nation states three hundred and fifty years ago. The Hapsburgs tried it. Louis XIV tried. So did Napoleon. Germany tried in World War I, and together with Japan, again in World War II. The result is pretty plain. All those who have faced this position before have failed sooner or later.

There are of course differences from the past. The technology at our disposal, the size of our economy and our sheer numbers together give us far greater capacity to do either lasting damage or to make a positive difference for the world than mankind has ever remotely had before. We are not trying to conquer and occupy territory, although all the assets I just mentioned make it possible to impose our will from a distance to a much greater degree than ever before. In other words, we may not need to occupy a foreign land to have the same degree of influence over its fortunes that occupiers had in the past. On the other hand, there has never been a leveler of power - a great equalizer - like nuclear weapons before.

What hasn't changed is human nature: its passions, its irrationality, its greed, its propensity to feel fear, envy and resentment, its capacity for prejudice and misunderstanding. All of that is

hard-wired in us and will never change.

Since human nature is the driving force of history, it would therefore be wise to believe, no matter how powerful we feel at this moment, that our moment will be limited too, and that we should therefore approach it with a sense of limits, a sense of humility, if you like, rather than a feeling of triumphalism. The best guide, I think, would be to ask ourselves what kind of world order we would want to see if we were not in charge. Or think of it this way, what kind of world order will we want to have in place when our moment of dominance ends? This involves asking questions like: how much international law would we want? How much trust among nations? How much cooperation across borders? Do we want strong international institutions, or do we want to rely on ad hoc coalitions when a big problem emerges? The difficulty with the latter, of course, is that it is only a crisis management strategy. Nothing is in place for management between crises. And so on. You get the idea.

My point is that on your watch the U.S. is going to be making some choices of immense, long-term consequence for itself and for the world. It is unfamiliar terrain and, history tells us, dangerous. We are not well prepared for the responsibility. Most Americans know less about the rest of the world than do most citizens of other developed countries and of many developing ones as well. We think we are special in ways that are very good - that hold us to certain high standards - and in ways that are very bad - that tempt us to ignore political and cultural realities outside our borders.

For America to succeed at this critical juncture, it will need people like you. Whether you are ultimately policy makers, politicians, teachers, activists, businesspeople or professionals in others fields or concerned, aware, engaged and informed citizens. (Citizens who vote!) Your country will badly need the services of every one of you: your wisdom, your energy and your commitment. I hope you will be there for it.

Enough heavy message. I hope you have a ball in college. Learn as much as you can in class - and from your classmates. Waste only the absolute minimum amount of time on television, CDs, and video games. That's all someone else's experience - get out there and experience all you can for yourself. Look for what you love to do, because you'll do it best. But don't expect to find it right away. Remember that life is what takes place while you are making other plans. Above all, have fun. And in the words of that immortal philosopher, Yogi Berra, when you come to a fork in

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the road, take it.

Good luck — and congratulations.