

Savannah Country Day School Commencement Address

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Georgia Historical Society

Thank you, Theo [McGuirk], for that kind introduction. Congratulations to you on achieving your standing as Salutatorian of your class.

Head of School Wilson; Mr. Beaver; Members of the Board and Faculty of Savannah Country Day School; proud parents; and Class of 2026.

Let me begin by expressing my thanks and honor at being invited to deliver the commencement address. My family and I have deep ties to this institution. My daughter, Kate, was a “lifer” who spent 14 years on this campus, graduating in the Class of 2017. During the last six years of her schooling, I had the privilege of serving on the SCDS Board of Directors and was a member of the search committee that hired Kef Wilson as head of school—and that turned out to be a great decision.

Congratulations to these graduating seniors. Savannah Country Day is an outstanding, academically rigorous school and completing your course of study here is quite an accomplishment. When I was asked to speak today, I chuckled to myself because I thought, “There is no way I could even get into this school, let alone graduate from it!”

Realizing that I am the only thing standing between this excited group of graduating seniors and the celebration that is to follow this ceremony, let me pitch right into my speech. Giving a commencement address is always a challenging task, but one made easier by the realization that, in time, no one will remember anything I say here today!

In 1816, former President Thomas Jefferson wrote to his friend, another former President, John Adams, expressing his optimism for the country they had founded 40 years earlier. “I prefer the dreams of the future,” Jefferson confessed, “to the history of the past.”

Now it may come as a surprise that I, as a historian, agree with Thomas Jefferson. I, too, prefer the dreams of the future over the history of the past. In fact, that is why I became a historian—because I know that the purpose of studying the past is to give us the knowledge we need to create a better future. In other words, “the dreams of the future” that Jefferson spoke of will never be realized without the history of the past.

Class of 2026, you have the distinction of graduating on the eve of our nation’s 250<sup>th</sup> birthday, known officially as the Semi-quincentennial of the United States. In fact, we might even call you America’s Semi-quincentennial Class, the cohort of citizens who are leaving high school during this auspicious commemoration and who will lead the nation over the course of the next half century until we celebrate our 300th anniversary in 2076.

The 250th anniversary of the United States—and your high school graduation—are coming at a crucial time in America’s experiment in self-government. Currently, our nation is experiencing

some of the most dramatic demographic, economic, political, and social changes we have seen in half a century, testing the strength of the world's oldest representative democracy.

Not since the turbulent decades of the 1960s and 1970s has our political system endured such stress or been questioned by our own leaders. Consequently, many have lost faith in the institutions of democracy, and they fear for the future of our Republic.

This is not a partisan issue. Americans of all political persuasions are concerned about what they perceive as an erosion in the norms of conduct and the pillars that sustain how free people govern themselves.

In particular, the media, the courts, elections, education, and the Constitution itself seem no longer to possess the confidence once placed in them. Some even wonder if democracy has failed altogether, producing unintended social and economic consequences for our country and the world.

Young people are especially disillusioned with democracy. According to one recent poll, nearly half of all Americans under the age of 30 have given up on the idea of self-government.

So how can we restore faith in Thomas Jefferson's dreams of the future?

One way to restore faith in the future is to better understand the past. Those dreams of the future that Jefferson preferred are inextricably linked to the study of history.

We can use history to demonstrate why democracy is preferable to any other form of government, no matter how messy and inefficient it may be. As Winston Churchill once observed, "Democracy is the worst form of government—except for all those other forms we have tried from time to time."

In fact, history reveals that the great strength of democracy is the messiness and inefficiency that maintains a balance of power between the branches of government. At its core, democracy is an invitation to an argument—about where we have been, where we are going, and how best to get there.

And our national experience has shown that no one argues better than Americans. We are good at arguing because we instinctively understand that argument is prelude to *compromise*—and compromise is necessary for a free people to govern themselves.

Perhaps most important of all, history has the power to remind us of who we are as Americans. The essence of what it means to be an American is contained in the story of our nation's journey through time. There is a good reason why nearly 75 percent of the questions on the citizenship test relate to our country's history.

And when we tell the story of the past in all its complexity, we can inspire Americans to renew their commitment to the radical and still liberating ideals embodied in the Declaration of Independence—namely, the equality of all people, their unalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and their ability to govern themselves by choosing their leaders—ideals that originally were narrowly applied but have an even greater meaning for all Americans 250 years later.

In that sense, the American Revolution is not some static event frozen in a remote past. It is a vibrant, powerful idea that lives to this day, continually driving us to expand human freedom and create a more perfect Union.

Even when we have disagreed bitterly over who should be free and who should not, over who should be equal and who should not, the Declaration of Independence has offered us a unifying theme and a point of reference around which all Americans could unite. The 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment ending slavery, the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment granting women the right to vote, and the Civil Rights legislation of the 1960s are all examples of the continuing American Revolution.

So here is my challenge to you, the Class of 2026:

At this school, you have been trained to lead. And in a few years, you will be called upon to lead this country.

If America is to not only survive, but also to flourish, as leaders and citizens you must recommit yourselves—as did every generation before you—to the dream and the idea of the American Revolution. Those lofty and timeless principles enshrined in the Declaration of Independence about equality, about unalienable rights, and about power flowing from the people have always united us and are greater than any of the things that divide us.

As you recommit to the ideals of the American Revolution, I challenge you also to live by those time-tested virtues of duty, honor, integrity, courage, humility, patience, compromise, compassion, and self-restraint. Those virtues—and the character they build—they still matter, and they will always matter so long as self-government matters. Free people cannot govern themselves without them. Indeed, they will ultimately lose their freedom if they do not insist upon them, especially in their leaders.

History teaches us that no republic can survive without what the Ancient Greeks and Romans called “public virtue,” a voluntary dedication to the common good where leaders accept restraints on their power and put the community’s wellbeing ahead of their personal gain. That concept was understood by the founders of Georgia, the Georgia Trustees, who in 1732 adopted as the motto of the Georgia colony the Latin phrase *Non Sibi, Sed Aliis*—“Not for Self, but for Others.”

Allow “the better angels of your nature,” as Abraham Lincoln said during another divided time, to reassert themselves. Trust once again in our national institutions and trust again in each other. Show empathy for your fellow Americans, listen to their needs and concerns, and remember that they are not the enemy.

Jefferson once observed that not every disagreement of opinion is a disagreement of principle. The greatest association any of us will ever enjoy is that we are all Americans and citizens of this great Republic. We all want the same things for ourselves and our families. We just disagree about how to get there.

Remember the example our country has set for the world over the last two and a half centuries. In the long and historic struggle between democracy and tyranny the world has needed—and still needs—a strong United States that is committed to self-government at home and to maintaining the international rules-based order that since the end of WWII has prevented the horrors of another global conflict.

The moral authority of America—what Lincoln called “the last, best hope of earth”—has been more powerful than all our vaunted economic strength and military might combined.

In his famous Lyceum Speech delivered in 1839 when he was a young man, a 28-year-old Abraham Lincoln proclaimed that no foreign power could ever destroy America. If our nation fails, Lincoln argued, it will be because Americans no longer believe in the dream and the ideals of the American Revolution.

Lincoln’s speech foreshadowed the Civil War 23 years later, when he as president had to lead our nation in rededicating itself to the principles of the Declaration of Independence. By destroying slavery and the secession movement slavery created, Lincoln gave America “a new birth of freedom,” ensuring for his generation that democracy, as he put it, “shall not perish from the face of the earth.”

Graduates, in just a moment you will walk across this stage and receive your diplomas. As you make that passage from childhood into adulthood and become citizens of the Republic, remember that the future—our future—is in your hands.

When you get to be my age, I and most of the folks sitting in the audience will be dead and gone. You will be in charge. You will determine if the dreams of the future will be better than the story of the past. You will decide whether America is still a beacon of freedom or a relic of a by-gone era.

Yes, like Thomas Jefferson, I still believe in the “dreams of the future.” I believe in the enduring ideals of the American Revolution. And I believe in the promise of the United States of America.

Because, I believe in *you*, the Class of 2026.

Again, congratulations. God bless you and good luck in your new adventures.