

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS
COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS
AUSTIN, TX
MAY 19, 2012

Thank you, President Powers, for that kind introduction and thank you for this great honor. Let me just say here, before the Longhorn nation, how much I enjoyed working with Bill Powers -- one of America's great university presidents. You are blessed to have him as your leader. And, the best I can wish for all Longhorns is that people like Bill Powers and Larry Faulkner continue to lead this great university long into the future.

I should start by addressing the many parents here today. No doubt, you are justifiably proud of what your son or daughter has accomplished and your own contribution in getting them **to this evening**. I suspect **many of** you are already planning to spend some of your newly re-acquired disposable income. Forget it. The National Bank of Mom and Dad is still open.

Now, to the Class of 2012 – Congratulations on **your** great achievement!

I am greatly honored to be chosen as your graduation speaker, and **I** will return the favor by keeping my remarks short. A British nobleman, Lord Birkett, known for being long-winded, once said: “**I don’t** object to people looking at their watches when I am speaking. But I strongly object when they start shaking them to make certain that they are still going.” As someone who presided over some 40 commencements at a certain other Texas university, I know full well that by this point in the ceremony, I’m the last thing standing between you, the fireworks and a great party. **I also know, to** paraphrase Abraham Lincoln, **that** you will little note nor long remember what is said here tonight.

Now, typically a graduation speaker is supposed to share some advice on how to succeed in life. **Well, I** could quote the billionaire J. Paul Getty, who offered sage wisdom on how to get rich. He said, “Rise early, work late, strike oil.” Or, film director Alfred Hitchcock, who explained, “There’s nothing to winning really. That is, if you happen to be blessed with a keen eye, an agile mind, and no scruples whatsoever.”

Well, instead of those messages, my only words of advice for success **tonight** come from two great women. First, opera star Beverly Sills, who said, “There are no short cuts to any place worth going.” And second, from Katherine Hepburn, who wrote, “Life is to be lived. If you have to support yourself, you had bloody well find some way that is going to be interesting. And you don’t do that by sitting around wondering about yourself.”

So first, a **word** about the place you’ve called home these past few years. To be sure, you have been fortunate to attend one of America’s premier public institutions of higher education. You experienced the unparalleled learning that takes place at the University of Texas – learning enriched by the combination of teaching and research that has made American higher education the envy of the world. What is discovered in the lab one day is taught in the classroom the next. **This** blending of teaching and research makes U.T., A&M, and all great universities unique incubators of human talent, discovery, and economic **innovation and development**.

There is no better proof of this than Austin itself. And after all, what starts here, changes the world.

Visiting any university campus, especially in Texas, always carries a special personal meaning **for me**. It's a reminder of what so struck and moved me when I went from being a university president to Secretary of Defense in a time of war. As president of Texas A&M I would walk the campus, and – just like here – I would see thousands of students aged 18 to 25, typically wearing t-shirts and shorts and backpacks. The day after I became Defense secretary in December 2006, I flew to Iraq and visited our troops there. I was struck by the fact that all of them were the very same age of the students I had left behind. Except these 18- to 25-year olds were wearing full body armor, carrying assault rifles, and living in peril, putting their lives on the line to protect all of us, all of you; putting their dreams on hold so you could pursue yours.

Over the past decade this generation of young patriots has included many Longhorns in uniform – their ranks most recently joined by the 23 ROTC cadets from all service branches commissioned **here** yesterday. These cadets signed up knowing the very real sacrifices that might be required when volunteering in a time of war – long separations from family, difficult living conditions, exposure to danger, and in the case of Orlando Bonilla, class of 1999, the ultimate sacrifice.

The wars those brave men and women were sent to fight in Afghanistan and in Iraq – many of them based on deployment orders I signed – were the most searing of a series of challenges that has made the last few years a difficult period for the United States. Indeed, for the first time in decades, this country is dealing with a combination of prolonged unemployment, staggering debt, stagnant growth, and record high budget deficits. America's leadership is being questioned and our way of life challenged around the globe. Consequently, there has not been a lot of optimism in the air recently. And that was before the 2012 **election** campaign got underway.

Over the course of more than four decades in public life, I've been accused of many things. Being a starry-eyed optimist is not one of them. There's an old saying that when an intelligence officer smells the flowers, he looks around for the coffin. Indeed, I was once referred to as the "Eyeore of the national security establishment," looking for the darkest lining in the brightest cloud. Well, today the clouds appear pretty dark, but the silver lining I see is this: While the obstacles to getting this country back on track are steep, Americans also have the means at our disposal to overcome them; whether the issue is our national debt, immigration, crumbling infrastructure, government deficits, underperforming schools, or whatever.

The progress on these or any other major issue will require America's political class to show leadership and make decisions that may be unpopular in the short run but will strengthen the country in the long haul. It will require tough choices – choices politicians must be willing to make, choices the voting public must be willing to accept. It will require a combination of compromise and sacrifice – both dirty words these days. Elected officials will have to decide **whether** saving their seat – literally **or** figuratively – is more important than saving the country.

Overcoming America's problems will require something else: And that is the willingness of our best and brightest young people, from all walks of life, to step forward and bring their talents and fresh perspectives to bear on the problems facing this country. The obligations of citizenship in any democracy are considerable, but they are even more profound, and more demanding for a nation with America's domestic problems and international obligations.

So as you venture forth from this great university, I encourage you to discover for yourself what it is that drives you, what course or career path engages your head and your heart and your passion, and then pursue it with all your energy and all your commitment. But I also ask you to consider spending at least a part of your life in public service – to give back to the community, the state, or the country that have already given you so much.

As you contemplate the prospect of public life, it can be disheartening to hear **the** rancorous and even tawdry political discourse in today's world. So I worry that too many of our brightest young Americans, so public-minded, so engaged when it comes to volunteerism on campus and in their communities, turn aside when it comes to careers in public service.

I entered government nearly 46 years ago, and no one is more familiar with its hassles, frustrations, and sacrifices. Government is, by design, slow and unwieldy. Our Founding Fathers set up a system to protect liberty, not to maximize efficiency. Will Rogers **once said**: "I don't make jokes. I just watch the government and report the facts."

As one moves up the career ladder to more senior positions in government, the vetting and selection process only becomes more intrusive, more acrimonious and more politicized. And the current state of our politics isn't exactly the best marketing scheme for attracting new talent.

Yet we shouldn't delude ourselves about recapturing a reasonable, civil, and mostly imaginary political past. In reality, political life has always been rough in America. One of Thomas Jefferson's critics said it would have been advantageous to his reputation **had his head** been cut off five minutes before he took his inaugural oath. John Adams was once called a "hideous hermaphroditical character **who** has neither the force and firmness of a man, nor the gentleness and sensibility of a woman."

But there is another aspect to public service about which Americans hear very little: **and that is** the idealism, the joy, the satisfaction and **the** fulfillment. I joined CIA in 1966 to defend our country against the former Soviet Union, and with any luck, **to** help bring down the entire rotten structure. Twenty-five years later, as Director of CIA, I watched the Soviet empire crumble, liberating hundreds of millions of people and ending what had been a near constant threat of nuclear Armageddon. There are countless others whose stories may not reach world-historical levels of drama or consequence. Yet these Americans still look back with pride and satisfaction on what they accomplished in service to their fellow Americans.

In the end, each person in public service has his or her own story and motives. But I believe, if you scratch deeply enough, you will find that those who serve – no matter how outwardly tough or jaded or even egotistical – are, in their heart of hearts, romantics and idealists. And optimists. We actually believe we can make a difference in the lives of others, that we can better the future of this country and **of the** world.

To serve your fellow citizens you don't need to deploy to a war zone or move to a developing country or bury yourself in a cubicle by the Potomac River. You don't have to be a CIA operative tracking the world's most notorious terrorist. Nor, must you lead a team of warriors bringing that terrorist to a just and violent end – like Admiral Bill McCraven, distinguished alumnus, **Texas** class of '77. Everywhere there are children to be taught, veterans to be healed, roads to build, communities to strengthen, especially in these challenging times. In building a good business and staying involved in your community, you render public service in many ways.

One of the great women of American history, Abigail Adams, wrote **to** her son and future president, John Quincy, during the American Revolution. She wrote: “These are the times in which a genius would wish to live. It is not in the still calm of life, or the repose of a pacific station that great characters are formed... Great necessities call out great virtues.”

We live in a time of “great necessities” – a time when we cannot avoid the challenges of addressing our country’s domestic problems or the burdens of global leadership. The implications for your generation are best captured by the words of Abigail **Adams’** husband. In a letter to another son, John Adams wrote: “Public business my son... must always be done by somebody. It will be done by somebody or another. If wise men decline it, others will not; if honest men refuse it, others will not.” And so I ask you, The University of Texas Class of 2012, will the wise and honest among you come help serve the American people and help make a better world?

Congratulations, God Bless and Godspeed.

###