



Monday, December 22, 2003

'Doing the Hard Work of Democracy'

Thank you, Provost Moudgil, for your very kind introduction and thanks to you and Dr. Russi for your outstanding leadership, which has helped bring this university into the ranks of the nation's finest. Dean Frick, Dean Gardner, distinguished faculty and staff, thank you so much.

This recognition and honorary degree means a great deal to me personally. Serving on the Board of Advisers of this prestigious university was truly a privilege that left me with great respect and a soft spot for this school, its outstanding faculty, and its first-rate students. So thank you again for this great privilege and singular honor.

I know that all of you are anxious to [climb the stairs over here] and pick up the degrees you've worked so hard to earn. For those of you who have been holding down a job while going to school, we have that in common. I can personally attest that this has been a difficult challenge.

Let me first congratulate each of the Oakland University graduates here today for your great achievement. You are now officially ready for the real world.

I also want to extend my congratulations to the proud families here today. I'm sure many of you are struggling with some unfamiliar emotions.

My wife Dottie and I are old pros at this. We've watched three children graduate so we know exactly what you're feeling. It's called relief! You've earned it. And, for many of you, this is likely the biggest financial raise you'll ever receive.... So, enjoy the day.

Graduates of the Class of 2003, thank you for asking me to be a part of what is one of the most important days in your lives – when you walk across this stage and leave with a piece of paper that says, "I did it." You did do something extraordinary. You pursued a path of intellectual rigor, tested your limits, and reached the goal you set for yourself.

Each of you has earned a pat on the back today – maybe more than one. But, unfortunately, in this otherwise joyful season, I have bad tidings for you. Tomorrow – tomorrow the world is going to be right there in your face asking, "Yeah, well what have you done for me lately?" And rightfully so.

My generation was blessed, and your generation is even more blessed, with more opportunity than any other in the history of the world. Most of you have never faced your own mortality in the violence of war, or gone hungry, or severely suffered through a cold winter or lived under the suffocating weight of a repressive regime. Hopefully, most of you have also never known real poverty.

Your lives, for the most part, have been a gift. So on this day, when you cross an important threshold in your life, you need to ask yourself: "How do I repay this gift? Am I going to change the world for the better or simply take up space?"

You need to answer these important questions in an age of great promise and of great danger; an age when liberty can be expanded...and in a time of deadly global terror. It is an historic moment for our nation and, to be frank, one that may well demand far more of you as Americans, and as citizens of the world, than was ever asked of your parents.

You must be up to the task. For 228 years, generations before you have shouldered the responsibility of serving this country, in ways large and small, to preserve the liberties and freedoms that we all enjoy today.

For one American generation, it was the tyranny of fascism in World War II that shaped their world and shook it to its very foundations. For the next generation, it was Communism, with Korea and Vietnam, that tested their mettle, and they were not found wanting. That generation prevailed in a Cold War that lasted for 40 years.

Today, a new fanatical threat, another "ism", the third of my lifetime, has emerged – one born of hate and extremism that threatens peace, stability and our democratic way of life. It is a danger less defined, less visible but potentially more destructive than any other threat this country or the world, for that matter, has ever faced. Defeating global terrorism will be the challenge of your generation and perhaps your children's, for it is a war that will not be won quickly or easily.

But, I assure you, it will be won because our nation and our allies continue to embrace a vision of liberty for all peoples. Our commander-in-chief clearly understands that our nation plays a unique role in securing liberty for the world.

With great clarity of vision and unwavering resolve, President Bush has expressed our responsibility this way, "The advance of freedom is the calling of our time; it is the calling of our country...We believe that liberty is the design of nature. We believe that liberty is the direction of history. We believe that human fulfillment and excellence come in the responsible exercise of liberty. And we believe that freedom – the freedom we prize – is not for us alone, it is the right and the capacity of all mankind." And, as the president said in London last month, "We will finish the work of democracy that we have begun."

But the work of democracy is hard and never-ending, and it goes on beyond the borders of Iraq and Afghanistan. It both supports and is supported by a multitude of tasks undertaken every day by citizens enjoying the fruits of democracy. This occurs in AIDS clinics and in the classrooms and in the applied research labs right here at Oakland University.

It can be found in the heart of a Peace Corps volunteer in Guatemala, or among the employees of a nonprofit organization in Omaha, or even in the profit and loss statement of a hardnosed businessman on Wall Street. It's found in micro cap businesses, small businesses and Fortune 500 companies. The work of democracy is found every day in people who do their daily jobs and who foster a climate of excellence.

While there are many noble callings, it is also true that every day, every person can set new and ever higher standards of ethics and performance in his or her home, community and workplace. This, too, is the hard work of democracy.

I specifically mentioned ethics because the actions of some chief executives and irresponsible managers in these past few years have been embarrassing to the business community, and an embarrassment to our country. In some cases, there are issues of legal compliance, but, in all cases, there are issues of ethical performance.

One thing I learned as a young man and have valued throughout my career is that high ethical standards are crucially important for any enterprise, regardless of size or product, to survive, prosper and grow.

Democracy, and its inherent attributes of freedom and liberty, cannot survive as an institution without having highly ethical leaders across the broad spectrum of activities in our country. Therefore, no matter what you choose to do in your careers, you absolutely must commit yourselves to high ethical standards every time, with everyone and in every situation. There are no exceptions, and there are no compromises.

As you graduate and go forward, reject what British historian Paul Johnson calls the ideology of pessimism. Listen, instead, to the believers who planned D-Day, who took us to the moon and back, and who built a big, little thing called the personal computer. They were people of big dreams and big ideas.

While these are dangerous times, they are also times of unlimited possibilities. Perhaps a toxin or chemical that we now fear as a possible weapon of mass destruction will someday be transformed by one of you as a cure or treatment for some currently incurable disease. Perhaps a new business process, or procedure that you develop for your own small company, will become the next revolution in business and government nationwide or worldwide.

Three days ago President Bush and I were in Kitty Hawk with some of America's best, brightest and bravest to mark an extraordinary human accomplishment, the centennial of flight. A mere century before, two mid-Western brothers had "slipped the surly bonds of Earth" for a few seconds, advanced human knowledge and accomplishment, and set us on a path that would bring the world closer together. Now, as then, you stand in the forefront of an historic time – a time still rooted in a deeply held idealism that believes in the power of democracy to truly transform the world.

Just three weeks ago, I had Thanksgiving dinner with some of those believers – some of your fellow Americans – the 2nd Battalion, 8th Marines (an infantry battalion) – and also with members of a Marine light attack helicopter squadron – all stationed in the town of Bagram, Afghanistan. Let me tell you, it's not Club Med over there, but for these marines and sailors, hardship is a matter of duty and honor. For me, it was a Thanksgiving I will never forget. We should all be thankful for their service.

These men and women have chosen a harder life than most of us – often away from family and friends, lives of courage and conviction. They have made their choices. You are about to make yours.

And, like them, our nation has need of you. It needs you to lead in your companies and to live in your communities as men and women of the highest ethics and integrity. Our country needs your creativity, your imagination, your drive and your talent to make a stronger America at home, making America a stronger force for peace and freedom overseas.

Creativity comes in all shapes and sizes. Any one of you could be your generation's Thomas Jefferson or John Glenn, Orville Wright or Bill Gates, Madame Curie or Admiral Grace Hopper. You could be the one to change the world.

One hundred and fifty years ago, the spirit of growing and building – enabled by the work of democracy – pushed the pioneers

west. One hundred years ago, innovation – supported in democracy – lit our cities, and a decade ago, connected the world. It defeated fascism and communism and today has become a force for good in this troubled world of ours.

The work of democracy is a big idea – perhaps the very biggest and you are being given the chance to continue its legacy. So, let me leave you with this challenge.

Recognize the gifts you have been given – liberty, education, and opportunity. Use those gifts to embrace the hard work of democracy, in whatever forum you choose, but make your lives stand for something ...something greater than self. Churchill said, “You make a living by what you get. You make a life by what you give.” Do some getting, but don’t forget the giving.

Look, you will soon forget who even gave this talk today. But, if there’s anything that you remember, remember this one quote and live by it: “You make a living by what you get. You make a life by what you give” – and do it with high ethical standards.

Let me offer this one final thought: You have a choice. I encourage you to choose a life of consequence. Decide now to make a difference. This country needs you. The world needs you. The hard work of democracy needs your talents and commitment. We old folks have high expectations for your generation...Surprise us! Make our expectations look timid in retrospect.

And, as a wise, old admiral once said: “Luck usually rides with the bold.” So, to the next “greatest generation,” be bold. God bless you and your families, this great institution, and God Bless America.

Thanks for the privilege and honor to share this day with you.

SUMMARY

Speech by Gordan England, secretary of the Navy, at OU's School of Engineering and Computer Science and School of Business Administration commencement ceremony on Dec. 20. England received an honorary Doctor of Science degree at the ceremony.

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