
Presentation by
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Keeping America Great: Doing Your Part

Commencement Address
before the
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President Kerwin, distinguished members of the Board of Trustees and faculty, graduates, parents, ladies and gentlemen. It's an honor to be with you today. Thank you for giving me this opportunity to address you and for awarding me an honorary degree. I'd also like to extend a warm Mother's Day greeting to all the mothers here today, including my wife, Mary, and my daughter, Carol.

First and foremost, congratulations to each and every graduate and to your families on your significant accomplishment. Earning a college degree is one of life's major milestones. And you're fortunate to be graduating from "The American University."

I recognize the hard work and dedication your degrees represent. Obviously, the degree that I just received is honorary, so yours cost a lot more than mine did! Even so, I want you to know I also take great pride in receiving a degree today.

Lately, I've been speaking out about our nation's future. So far this year, I've appeared on a number of major radio and television programs to talk about the growing fiscal challenge facing America. You may have heard me on the *Diane Rehm Show* or perhaps you saw me on the CBS news program *60 Minutes* or on Comedy Central's *Colbert Report*. The facts don't change during these appearances, but the means and messages do, depending on the venue and target audience.

My agency, the Government Accountability Office, is in the truth and transparency business. Or as Stephen Colbert would say, we're all about "truthiness." As the so-called investigative arm of Congress, GAO is in the oversight, insight, and foresight business. We "speak truth to power," and we try to make government work better and for the benefit of all Americans. By the way, I really appreciate all the graduates wearing "GAO blue" colored robes for today's commencement!

In my view, it's important to state the facts and speak the truth to the American people in connection with our fiscal situation and other important public policy issues. Too many television and radio programs today are essentially "fact-free zones," full of opinion, ideological rhetoric, and partisan spin. In America, we believe in free speech. As a result, everyone is entitled to his or her opinion but not his or her own facts. The facts are neither blue nor red. In reality, facts are colorless and should be transparent.

Today, I'm pleased and honored to spend a few minutes speaking to you on the importance of keeping America great. I firmly believe that each of us can play a part to help ensure that our individual and collective future is better than our past. After all, our nation's future is what you and I and our fellow citizens make of it.

From a personal perspective, while the Walker family has been in America since the 1600s, to my knowledge, I'm only the second person in my Walker line to have graduated from college. Before my father, most of the Walkers were mineworkers, farmers, or ministers. In fact, at least

one of my ancestors was a Methodist minister and circuit rider. As you know, the Methodist Church founded this university. Despite my family's modest beginnings, I now have the good fortune of being the seventh Comptroller General of the United States and head of the GAO. Only in America!

In America, individuals with a good education, a positive attitude, a strong work ethic, and solid moral and ethical values have virtually unlimited potential! That means if you have a good education, your future is largely in your hands. Your degree from American University is a great start. The rest is up to you!

From a broader perspective, clearly America is a great country, possibly the greatest in history. We've risen from one of many colonies ruled by England to become the world's only current superpower. We're the longest-standing republic on Earth and a beacon of liberty for the rest of the world. Those Americans like myself who have traveled extensively overseas know that while our country is far from perfect, in general, we have it pretty good today. Yes, Americans have much to be proud of and much to be thankful for.

America is number one in many things but not all things. As a result, while Americans have a right to be proud, we should never be arrogant. Unfortunately, the world has seen more than a little American arrogance of late, both domestically and internationally. That must change. After all, whether we're talking about safeguarding public health, protecting the environment, or combating international terrorism, the United States can't go it alone. We're going to have to partner for progress on these and other types of issues, which have no geopolitical boundaries.

Let there be no doubt, America's true strength is its people. America is a very diverse nation, and our diversity is a great asset—an asset we have yet to fully capitalize on. Despite our diversity, we Americans are united by our belief in equal opportunity. Through perseverance and hard work, any of us can achieve a better life. Our love of freedom is equaled only by our devotion to faith and family.

While America is a great nation, we face a range of large and growing sustainability challenges that too few policymakers are taking seriously. In so many areas—fiscal policy, foreign policy, health care, education, energy, the environment, immigration, and Iraq—we're on an unsustainable path. I'll briefly touch on three of these areas to prove my point.

First, since America's most valuable asset is its people, I'll start with education. The United States now has the best higher education system in the world. All of you are the beneficiaries of that system.

Unfortunately, we're not even in the top 20 nations in math and science scores at the high-school level. This represents a huge problem in a knowledge-based economy. If our country expects to maintain its standard of living, we're going to have to stay competitive on measures like innovation, productivity, and product quality. Fixing our K-12 education system will require

radical reform and concerted efforts by all levels of government and all sectors of our economy. We must move beyond rhetoric and start delivering real results for a broader spectrum of the American population.

Second, our nation's fiscal outlook. While short-term federal deficits are coming down, we face large and growing longer-range deficits and debt burdens due primarily to the retirement of the baby boom generation and rising health care costs. The retirement of the boomers will begin next year, and when boomers begin to retire en masse it will bring a tsunami of spending that could swamp our ship of state.

To help save our future, we must impose tough budget controls, reform Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid, and reprioritize and constrain other spending. We also need to engage in comprehensive tax reform that will not undercut our economic growth or competitive advantage while raising additional revenues. We must do all of these things, and the sooner the better because time is working against us and our debt clock is ticking.

Finally, while many of you graduates think that Social Security won't be around when you retire, you're wrong. It will be reformed, and hopefully sooner rather than later. Our real problem is Medicare and health care in general. Our health care system is badly broken. We're now number one in the world in health care spending and obesity—facts that don't bode well for our wallets or our waistlines. Despite spending huge amounts on medical care, the United States has above average infant mortality, below average life expectancy, and much higher than average medical error rates for an industrialized nation. We also have the largest percentage of uninsured individuals of any major nation. It's pretty clear we're not getting very good value for our health care dollars. Frankly, if there's one thing that could bankrupt America, it's health care costs.

Comprehensive health care reform will probably need to occur in installments over a number of years. Our goals should be fourfold: First, provide universal access to basic and essential health care. Second, impose limits on federal spending for health care. Third, implement national medical practice standards to improve quality, control costs, and reduce litigation risks while avoiding heroic measures. And finally, take steps to ensure that all Americans assume more personal responsibility and accountability for their own health and wellness.

You may be saying, why is he telling me about these challenges? All I want to do is take off this cap, get my diploma, and party on! My point is that these challenges, along with several others, are going to profoundly affect your future and the future of your families. One thing is clear: Young people will pay the price and bear the burden if others fail to act to address our mounting fiscal burden and other sustainability challenges. More importantly, I'm talking about these challenges because you and your peers represent the future leaders of our country! As a result, you are our greatest hope for bringing about change.

Unfortunately, many institutions and individuals in America today suffer from several afflictions. Myopia, tunnel vision, and self-centeredness just to name three. Too many people are focused on the word “me” rather than the word “we.” Too many people are focused on what they want today rather than what they need to do to help ensure a better future. And too many people are focused on their own narrow interests rather than the greater good.

Ignorance, apathy, and arrogance can be fatal when it comes to a nation and its people. The Roman Republic provided us with some important lessons in this regard over 1,500 years ago.

Let us not forget, the Roman Republic fell for many reasons, but three seem to resonate today. First, a decline in moral values and political civility at home. Second, an overconfident and overextended military in foreign lands. Third, fiscal irresponsibility by the central government. Sound familiar? We must learn from history and make sure that we are the first republic to stand the test of time.

In our constitutional democracy, it’s “we the people” who are ultimately responsible and accountable for what does or does not happen in the capitals around our country. As a result, all of us must be informed and involved in order to make a difference. We must not forget, God put each of us on this earth to serve our fellow man and to make a difference for others.

As you look to the future, each of you needs to search your head and your heart to decide not only what you’re going to do in life, but also what difference you are going to make in the lives of others. This is one of life’s most important decisions.

When you search your head and heart in your pursuit of happiness, don’t forget your communities, your country, and your fellow man. To help build a better future, I ask that each of you dedicate at least two years of your life to serving others. This request applies to all of you, whether you are an American or from one of the many other countries represented here today.

When you consider your public service options, remember that the U.S. government is the largest, the most diverse, and arguably the most important entity on the face of the earth. We need top talent in the federal government to successfully address our many sustainability challenges. Yes, the federal government needs men and women with skills in public affairs, business, and other fields from top universities like American University.

I also ask that each of you become more informed about the issues facing our nation and more involved in demanding change. It’s time we held current and prospective elected officials accountable for upholding their fiduciary and stewardship responsibilities to our country and its citizens.

In closing, every person can make a difference in this world. As one of my favorite Presidents, Teddy Roosevelt, said, “Fighting for the right [cause] is the noblest sport the world affords.”

All of you should find your cause in life and fight to make a difference. I'll continue to try and do my part. All that I ask is that you do your best to do your part to keep America great. We can, we must, and, with your help, we will do what it takes to keep America great!

Congratulations again on your graduation. May God bless each of you, American University, and the United States of America.

