

Ohio State University Commencement Address
Columbus, Ohio

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A Look Ahead

Good morning graduates and families, faculty and friends. Before we get to the more serious talk, I do want to tell you how wonderfully warm it makes me feel to be with you today. As you may have heard -- or guessed -- I have Buckeye blood in my veins. My father hailed from Bellefontaine, and my mother from Toledo. After my father graduated from Ohio State in 1912 and my mother the following year, they were married and took up housekeeping in Columbus. It was here that my father began his newspaper career. And it was here, 50 years ago, that my father stood at the podium in the middle of Ohio stadium and delivered the Commencement address to the graduating class of 1938.

While I was not born in Ohio and did not attend Ohio State, I want to tell you that I learned to sing Carmen Ohio before I knew the Star Spangled Banner.

To you graduates, I extend heartiest congratulations. You have already heard the conventional wisdom on the subject of graduation -- "not an end but a beginning." And it's true of course. It is also a period of transition. Yet I guess that is true also of every period in our lives. In this century, daily living has absorbed the automobile, the telephone, the airplane, radio, television, super markets, anti-biotics, electricity, nuclear power, washing machines, dryers, disposable diapers, laser surgery, computers, space travel and robotics. You can add endlessly to the list. And precisely because of this rapid advance in technology, we are today, more than ever, confronted with choices and value judgments.

Since we now have the capacity to do things we could never do before, we are forced to apply human value judgments in ways that were not possible or necessary. We must determine HOW to use nuclear force, for constructive or destructive purposes. We have to decide what to do with genetic engineering (and what not to do), whether to keep ourselves alive on life-support systems. And so on. The lesson is simple, and I will not belabor it. But I think in all of our talk about the new era of super-technology, we must not forget that it has to be guided and managed in accordance with humane values.

Just one more point of personal advice, and then we will look at the world in which you will live most of your life.

Do the things that are most satisfying -- and the rewards will follow. Do what you enjoy with all your heart and mind. If the pay is not as good -- at the start -- do it anyway, if you enjoy it. I think in the long run you will be more successful at the thing that feels good to ALL of your nature -- ALL of your aspirations and yearnings.

And I think you will have a very good climate for such choices. The opportunities in the work place, in academia, in public service and world affairs have never been greater. Truly.

You who are receiving your degrees today are part of a vital force in this country and the world. Every year U.S. colleges and universities grant nearly 1,000,000 baccalaureate degrees (from about 1400 4-year institutions) more than in any other nation of the world. To these we add nearly half as many again of associate degrees from 2-year institutions. We ask ourselves: How good are the products of our system? I say, at best they are very good. At worst, they are still better than they would have been without this enriching opportunity.

Yet we still face some daunting challenges in our educational system. We start with a huge backlog of illiteracy -- in the backwoods of Appalachia, in central cities, on reservations and in migrant camps. Clearly our work is cut out for us -- whether in the capacity of recent graduate, voter, trustee, alumnus, parent, teacher, scholar or administrator. We must make sure that we do not perpetuate a generation of "left behinds" who cannot cope with a high technology world.

Our success will depend partly on ourselves and partly on the kind of economy that is in store for us, as well as the kind of world in which we will live.

For our livelihoods, we will be in a decidedly global economy. This will impose on the educational world a parallel task of becoming more international in its academic offerings, in its outlook and curriculum.

The American educational establishment will face two imperatives:

1) To reach down more deeply into the lower levels of our own society...AND...

2) To thrust outward to the new societies that are growing up around the world.

There already is mobility among scholars, as we know from watching the Nobel prizes. Frequently, the honoree is at an institution far from his original base. Students traditionally exhibit peripatetic spirits (as did the migrant scholars of the Renaissance). But today more is needed than random wandering. Universities must develop closer liaison among themselves in international education, and the United States must take the lead in bringing the world's educators together.

Is the U.S. qualified to take this leadership? I believe it is. Despite temporary economic imbalances, in the federal budget, in international trade and cash flow, the economic and educational strength of the U.S. is far deeper than many people realize. In fact, there are many misconceptions about the U.S. economy which need to be dispelled.

Myth Number 1 is that U.S. productivity lags the rest of the world. It is true that other nations have been creeping up on us, narrowing the gap, improving faster, but many of them started at very low levels. With their improvement and their low labor rates, they have been able to compete fiercely in world markets. But U.S. industrial management has been moving too.

U.S. productivity still leads in such industries as electronics, synthetic materials, chemicals, super-computers, ceramics, fibre-optics, bio-technology, agriculture, paper, aircraft, aerospace, and robotics. These and others are competing head to head with foreign producers.

I believe we will see U.S. foreign trade increase steadily from its current 12% of GNP to nearly 20% by the year 2000. (It was only 3% in 1960.)

Myth Number 2: that American manufacturing is shrinking as a part of our total economy. The fact is that it still accounts for about 24% of our GNP. People are misled because manufacturing comes in different shapes today. Much of it is done in clean, bright, landscaped buildings instead of dirty, smoky, dingy old factories, but it is manufacturing nevertheless. What IS decreasing is employment, and that is a measure of the improvement in productivity.

Myth Number 3: that the U.S. governmental deficit is the heaviest in the world. The fact is that it is now about 3% of our GNP -- the same ratio as Japan's and roughly equivalent to several European nations. But our political sound system is bigger than theirs, so the U.S. deficit gets more attention.

There are other misconceptions, but suffice it to say that some of our roughest economic weather is behind us. We have been outhustled by some other economies, but we have now decided to pull up our socks and get cracking.

The world is on the threshold of a new decade, the decade of the 1990s. It will be a decade of global interdependence in an era of technology, yet with a growing appreciation of humanistic values.

In demographics, our population will be shifting toward the upper end of the age scale. We will live longer on average. The U.S. will start the '90s with 250,000,000 people, then keep growing -- adding about 2,000,000 a year. The college-age segment of our population will be down from recent peaks, but I think the impact will be less than we have been led to believe. Quality institutions will still have an enormous pool of applicants, and pressures for admission will continue. Institutions in the Northeast, Mid-Atlantic and Midwest will feel the population slow-down, but the effect will be countered by recruitment of students from other parts of the country. California, already the largest state in the union, will extend its lead in population. Texas will become number 2, and New York will slip to 3rd. Fourth largest will be Florida. By the year 2000, California, Texas and Florida -- those three states alone -- will contain one quarter of the U.S. population.

For colleges and universities this will mean that more Americans will be educated in the newer sections of the country, and institutions in the older parts of the country will become increasingly national in their student populations.

The political center of gravity will be in the South and West, which already hold a controlling count. After the reapportionment of 1990, the South will hold 240 seats in Congress (the House) -- versus 195 for the rest of the country.

At the turn of the next century, the U.S. work force will be 46% female, and many more families will be two-career couples.

The dominant age group during the '90s will be the maturing baby boomers, 30-45 years old (senior to you, and there will be 58,000,000 of them). Many of these men and women will be coming back to their alma maters for educational refreshment. Colleges and universities will be increasingly involved in lifetime education for professional and personal enrichment. The institutions will respond with more conference facilities and other infrastructure for these new educational services.

Our second largest population bloc in coming decades will be the over-65s (totalling 30,000,000) and many of them will be dipping back into educational life as time and money become more available.

For educational fund raising, the 1990s will be a golden age, if we take advantage of the opportunity. New business ventures of the '70s and '80s will burgeon into the corporate stars of the Global '90s. New fortunes will emerge, and educational experience will be the foundation of a new generation of entrepreneurs and managers. Nearly every new company will owe its existence to technology or some branch of higher education. The new millionaires of the '90s will be keenly aware that education was the key to their success.

I think the political climate of the future will be good for education. George Bush will want to put flesh on his promise to be "an education President." And for the federal budget it need not cost prohibitive sums of money: More assistance to graduate education, a strengthening of student loans, and greater moral support for the educational establishment -- these can accomplish wonders by stimulating support from the private sector.

What this suggests to each new graduate -- those of you here today -- is that the educational opportunities for succeeding generations will depend on you. I urge you to plan into your lives some time for support of your own university and the whole educational system -- not as a sop to nostalgia, but as a crucial ingredient of your own life and the success of this country in years ahead.

I say to each of you -- "Be a part of the educational scene at every level."

I once asked a distinguished educator what he would do if he had enough money to provide only four years of the finest education. Where would he put it? College? High School? Prep School? Where? His answer was loud and clear: Elementary. The first four years of education are most crucial. We who are involved primarily with the last four years need to pull our weight on the oars at the start of the race as well.

We know there is a formidable agenda ahead for education in this country. We have to keep the system strong and flexible. Education shares the dimensions that Dean Ezra Pound emphasized when he said that the law "must be stable, yet it must not stand still."

Despite our problems, I think the prospects are bright for higher education -- in this country and the world -- not only for those who have traditionally enjoyed its benefits but for the many millions of students for whom higher education will be an exhilarating new experience. It is a responsibility for us all, but my confidence is buttressed by the fact that you are going to be part of the scene and part of the solution.

As you turn another page in your life, you can be reassured by the prospect of continuing economic growth in your own nation, relative peace in the world and a wide vista of opportunity for educated men and women. Never before has our society stood in more urgent need of competent people skilled in the disciplines of language, science and human affairs.

You are prepared to fulfill that need, and I wish you well in your forthcoming careers. In the words of that old Irish blessing: "May the road rise to meet you. May the wind be at your back. May the sun shine warmly on your face, the rain fall gently on your fields, and may God hold you in the palm of his hand until we meet again."