

Commencement Address

The Hon. J.C. Watts

June 9, 2000

Thank you, Dr. Kirwan for those kind words – and thank you all for this warm welcome. I am honored to spend this special day with all of you – with the distinguished faculty and administration of this great institution, with the family and friends – 33,000 strong -- of the stars of today's show:

The Graduates of the Class of 2000.

This is a great day to be a graduate.

This is a great day to be an American.

And Lord help me for saying it:

This is a great day to be a Buckeye.

As we all know, every commencement is a time of new beginnings – but this year, that is especially true. Imagine: To be new graduates not only in a new century, but a new millennium... And to celebrate this day not just anywhere, but in America – the land where dreams still come true.

As parents, we read our children stories with fairy-tale endings. Well this story – the story of these graduates here today -- is a fairy-tale beginning.

Ladies and gentlemen, I truly believe that. I believe that because I am a child of the American Dream. I learned long ago never to be surprised by what life has in store.

Never in a million years did I dream that the fifth of six children born to Helen and Buddy Watts -- in a poor black neighborhood, in the rural community of Eufaula, Oklahoma -- would someday be called Congressman.

And never in all the years I spent in school did I dream I'd stand one day at a ceremony like this, not to receive a diploma – but to deliver the commencement address.

And never in 23 years – not since that Saturday back in 1977 when my Sooner teammates took a one point win away from the immortal Woody Hayes and his Buckeyes – never did I dream I'd be in a situation facing 25,000 Buckeye fans -- all by myself.

Now, it seems to me that the typical commencement speech is usually full of advice that's about as disposable as the disposable cameras some of you graduates are carrying today. So let me start with what you won't hear: You won't hear me tell you that I learned everything I needed to know in Kindergarten, since I'm still learning each day to live the life marked out for me. And no – I'm not here to remind you always to wear your sunscreen... Or to give you my “best and final answer” to the million-dollar question of life.

I think we can all see that a self-help society generates a lot of self-help silliness. It all reminds me of the fellow who went into a bookstore and asked the clerk at the information desk: Where will I find the self-help section?

And the clerk said: Well if I told you, that would defeat the whole purpose, wouldn't it?

I am here today not simply to celebrate your accomplishment and stroke your egos – but to challenge you. To remind you on this day when you stand in the center spotlight -- of all the other people who helped make this moment possible.

And that's a little bit unwelcome – I know that. Particularly on our graduation day, we all like to bask in the glow -- we all like to think we are the secret to our own success. I know when I look back on my own graduation day, standing with my friends, getting ready to go forth and to go pro – I know I was pretty pleased with myself, pretty impressed with my accomplishments. I saw myself as a regular self-made man.

And I was – as long as you didn't count my mother and father. Or my wife, Frankie... Or my Grandma Mithe... Or Coaches Bell or Anderson or Switzer... Or Max Silverman... Or Mrs. O'Reilly, my 4th Grade teacher, who called me out when I was headed wrong, and steered me back to the straight and narrow.

The truth is, it took more people to make the “self-made me” than you can count.

Well, you see where I'm going: I was no more a self-made man than any man or woman whom God ever set on this Earth.

None of us are self-made – and all of us owe a debt.

And that brings me to my message today.

Now, debt is a four-letter word I am sorry to have to inflict on your ears [this morning?], whether you're a parent who's still basking in the well-deserved glow of writing that last tuition check – or a graduate with a diversified portfolio of student loans. Today I've got a different kind of debt in mind – and I don't care if the OSU Registrar has stamped your diploma “paid in full:” You may not owe a dollar – but you still owe a debt.

You owe a debt to your parents, who gave you life, who gave you love – who believed in you every step of the way, from the first, faltering baby step, to the step you take today across this stage -- and into the next stage of your life.

You owe a debt to your extended family – your brothers and sisters, your aunts and uncles, your grandmoms and granddads for making you a life member in what philosopher Edmund Burke called life's “little platoons” – the community we call family.

And we're not done tallying up, because you owe a debt to your friends and fellow students, to your professors and the administrators here who welcomed you into this community of learning. Take it from me: You have no idea today how much the life of your mind – the forward arc of your intellect – will owe to the foundation you have built here: To the ever-expanding universe of learning of which this university is a part.

Now, if you're thinking – that's a lot of debt to be carrying at such a young age. Don't worry:

You've got a lifetime to pay it off.

What do you do with the kind of debt I'm talking about?

You do what every debtor does: You pay it back – with interest.

So think of that diploma you receive today as a promissory note. And the minute this ceremony is over – the very first second of the rest of your life – find the people who made your education and your graduation possible, and start paying down the debt:

Tell them -- thank you. Thank you for making this day possible. Tell them the truth: That you couldn't have done it without them.

Now, if you think that's all there is to paying off your debt – I've got news for you:

It's not that easy.

There's a saying I've heard -- most people offer it as a lesson for living – that life is divided into three phases: You learn, then you earn, then you serve. By that yardstick, as graduates today, you've done your learning, and now it's time to do some earning – to build the career that allows you to give back later. And what better time to indulge your dot-com dreams or your entrepreneurial urges. For young people with skills, it's a seller's market out there – you can go as far and as fast as your dreams and your drive takes you.

There's only one problem.

It's hard to know when you're done earning, and it's time to serve.

You've heard that life is a movable feast? Well, money is life's movable goal post. What do I mean?

Not too long ago, I read a book titled “The New New Thing.” Maybe you’ve read it too. It tells the story of a man named Jim Clark, who was the founding genius of Netscape. Clark made an incredible amount of money -- and when people asked him when he would retire, his stock answer was: “after I become a billionaire.”

Well, when he became a billionaire, he upped the amount to \$3 billion dollars. And when he got to \$3 billion, he told people, “I just want to have more money than Larry Ellison” -- the president and CEO of Oracle.

So when Clark passed Ellison he still didn’t retire – the goal post moved again. He raised that billion-dollar bar even higher: He told people, “Just for one moment I would like to have the most of anyone – even Bill Gates. Just for one tiny moment.”

And that really is a parable for our time – a tale of how the power of money can rule our lives. Maybe we all need to reflect a bit on the fact that the highest number – the highest value in the world of numbers – is infinity: No matter how high you stack the bills – there’s always another dollar out there. In other words, if you’re playing the money game – infinity is a goal line you’ll never cross.

Personally, I put my value in another kind of infinity – the eternity of the here-after -- and so do other people I know.

People like Warren. Warren isn’t a philanthropist. You’ll never find his name on the Forbes 400, or take a TV tour of his house on Lifestyles of the Rich & Famous. Warren’s a shoeshine man I met one day in Oklahoma City. As we

talked, he was telling me about his three grown kids – all college graduates. Three kids he'd put through college shining shoes – at \$2 a throw. I don't know about you, but in my book that makes Warren wealthy in the only way that matters – with a bounty that benefits others.

Now I know you don't know Warren. I suppose it's possible that if your travels ever bring you to Oklahoma City, you might meet him – but probably you won't.

No matter. Add him to your list.

That's right – you owe him a debt – and everyone like him who takes a little smaller share for themselves so that their children and grandchildren can reach higher, dream bigger, go farther.

As a proud American, you won't hear me speak too kindly of taking on debt. In matters of economics, I want the books to be balanced. But on matters of morality – on matters of community – I am a big believer in debt, the bigger the better. This is one debt I am glad we hand down generation to generation, person to person – community to community.

I say that because, just as debt grows with interest -- if our compassion compounds – if we cultivate what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called “the conscience of community” – society will prosper.

And that's key: Because every community is in need of renewal. You see that here in Columbus, on this very campus. I know the spirit of community here on this campus was tested recently – tested by the labor dispute just recently settled. Getting a new contract in place allows you to move forward – but

signing a contract isn't the same as restoring a sense of community. One takes a change of mind – the other takes a change of heart...

...So I challenge those of you who are part of this campus community: [Sit down together at what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called “the table of brotherhood.”] Reach out to one another in respect – unite yourselves, in Ohio State purpose and Ohio State pride. Renew the sense of community that makes this university great.

And like a pebble in a pond, that renewal will radiate out across our country, across our society and down the generations.

And all across this country, that renewal cannot come too soon – because we sorely need it now.

We need renewal now because of what so many of life's experiences teach us. Don't turn the other cheek. Do unto others before they do it to you. Don't ever apologize -- it makes you look weak. Be a bully – and have an edge about you, to make it in this shark's world. Hard lessons for hard hearts – the kind of lessons we've got to un-learn if we're going to move forward.

And don't let the exuberance of our economy fool you. Because it is entirely possible to have an economic surplus – and a moral deficit: A society that enjoys material abundance – at the same time it endures a spiritual emptiness.

But this is a day not to lament – but to lift up. A day to ask a gathering like this one, with all of your intelligence – with all of your newly-

honed skills – with killer-resumes like yours: What can we do not simply to “add value” for our next employer – but to add value to society as a whole?

The strength of America isn't in agriculture, or oil and gas, as we would have you believe in Oklahoma, or in the automobile industry or financial services or even today's highest-flying IPO. The strength of America is her people. You. Me. Us. Our hopes. Our dreams. Our ambitions – and most important, our goodness.

People make America – not the government. I don't see a need for a federal program to tackle every problem. However, I do see a need to turn a new page – to find a new way to use the power of law to encourage community renewal.

Indeed, for five years now, I have pushed a plan in Congress called the American Community Renewal Act -- to do just that: To recognize that a rising Dow Jones does not lift all boats – and that we have a special obligation to lift those left behind in these great economic times.

For five years now we've pushed our plan for community renewal and for five years we've come up short – but we've been building converts on both sides of the political aisle for an idea whose time would surely come. And the good news is that two weeks ago, the President and key members of both parties in the House and Senate signed onto our bill – paving the way for passage this summer.

Now, help from Washington is quite often the very last thing a community needs. But this bill is different.

This is help from Washington that begins with a recognition that the forces of community renewal often come from communities of faith – and that people in need have a right to seek help from faith-based institutions.

This is help from Washington that doesn't believe government-knows-best – that believes local people, and private institutions can do the public good.

This is help from Washington that in place of federal edicts, offers incentives – incentives like a zero capital gains rate, to increase community leaders' ability to attract new capital and make their community a magnet for new investment.

Now, as critical as I believe our bill will be in supporting the forces of community renewal, it's important to know where I'm coming from -- because where I'm coming from isn't Washington.

Our calling to build community – our responsibility to renew and restore the spiritual center of our society, comes not because of what the law says – but because of the law a Mighty Hand has written on our hearts.

[TELL MAN & BOY STORY...]

...And the boy said to his father: On the back there was a picture of a man, and when I put that man together – the world just fell into place.

I think of that story whenever I meet someone who seems so set on “saving the world” that they don't see the suffering right in front of them. Let's all learn from the boy in that story: Put the man back together – and the world will fall into place.

And so this morning my challenge to you: Whether you stay on here in Columbus – or start anew in a new city or state far away from here...

...Pay down the debt.

Go to a church, a parish, a synagogue, a school or a shelter, find the person in charge and tell them: I'm here to do whatever needs doing.

Pay down the debt.

Don't measure your worth by your paycheck or your latest promotion – but by the difference you make to people in need.

Pay down the debt.

Don't think of charity as an envelope you put in the church offering on Sunday. Don't just give of your dollars – give of yourself.

Pay down the debt – honor those who have come before, and obligate those who come after.

Pay down the debt...

...Build on -- and build up -- this land we love.

Graduates of the Class of 2000: May God bless you – and may God bless America.

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