

SPRING COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

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President Gee, distinguished guests and degree recipients ---

I am truly honored and very happy to be here to speak to you.

My role today is symbolic of what this nation and its public universities represent in our time. I was the first in my family to attend college. Now, my oldest son, who was born on the Ohio State campus in University Hospital and lived in Buckeye Village, is just a completed dissertation away from receiving his Ph. D. at another public university.

I *was* worried that *none* of us might be here today. I had heard that the university's budget problems were so severe that the trustees had secretly sold Ohio Stadium to help make ends meet.

Fortunately, the new owners apparently agreed to rent the stadium to the university for all of the Buckeyes' home football games. So, if the budget cuts had gone any deeper, today's commencement ceremony might have been delayed until halftime at next fall's Homecoming game.

We alumni also have felt the university's financial squeeze. We have been inundated with fund-raising requests from Ohio State --- letters, telephone calls, pledge cards.

I noticed that those sent to me seemed to increase right after President Gee invited me to be today's commencement speaker. I didn't want to blow this opportunity, so I've been writing one check after another to Ohio State.

But I finally had to draw the line somewhere. I simply refused to write a check to the Gordon Gee bow-tie fund.

Nothing, however, could diminish my excitement about speaking to you here today.

As I look out on this vast and storied stadium, I realize that, for me, the writer Thomas Wolfe was wrong. You *can* go home again!

Nearly thirty years ago, I was sitting out where you are, waiting for the commencement speaker to finish so that I could receive *my* degree.

Like many of you, I earned that degree the hard way --- by making the grades necessary for scholarship money and by working at jobs at a local bakery, an insurance company and the university's alumni magazine.

When I first walked into The Washington Post as a summer intern reporter in 1964, I became one of only two state university graduates in a newsroom filled with Ivy Leaguers. My colleagues from Harvard and Yale called me "Land-Grant Downie."

I started out writing obituaries and covering police headquarters at night and on the weekends. I eventually became an investigative reporter and wrote about injustices in the local court system and the exploitation of working class black Washingtonians by slum landlords, home improvement contractors and financial institutions. Later, I became an editor and helped direct our coverage of the Watergate scandal that led to the resignation of President Nixon in 1974.

Since then, I've interviewed Presidents, Prime Ministers and cabinet members, and I've survived confrontations with FBI and CIA directors, congressional leaders and White House officials.

But, basically, I'm still "Land-Grant Downie" --- the kid from Cleveland who, in the fifth grade, decided he wanted to be a newspaperman and who, in high school, won a journalism scholarship to Ohio State.

It was so long ago when *I* was a student here that both the football team and the *men's* basketball team were National Champions while I was sports editor of the *Lantern*.

It was so long ago that the only student protest of any size on campus was about *football*.

In 1961, the Faculty Council refused to allow Ohio State's Big Ten champion football team to go to the Rose Bowl because the faculty thought it was too commercial. Thousands of Ohio State students reacted by rioting in High

Street, overturning cars and rampaging all the way downtown to the State Capitol. The campus was in an uproar for weeks.

I covered that story for the Lantern.

Some months later, I also covered the decision by then Ohio State president Novice Fawcett to ban a young man named Philip Luce from speaking on campus. Luce was trying to make a name for himself as a leader of left-wing student causes at the beginning of the rebellious 1960s.

Luce was touring campuses to speak out against the House Un-American Activities Committee, a group of congressmen who investigated Americans they suspected of sympathizing with Communism.

That committee in the House of Representatives --- and Sen. Joseph McCarthy in the Senate --- had come to symbolize a dark witch-hunting period during the Cold War, in which the constitutional rights of many Americans were abused because of what they had said or because of the people or groups with which they had associated.

Philip Luce had been properly invited to speak at Ohio State by a member of the faculty. But Fawcett thought Luce and his message were subversive. So Fawcett rescinded the invitation under the sweeping authority of a Speaker's Rule that had been adopted by the Board of Trustees in 1961.

Fawcett then went further and locked Luce out of the university building where he was scheduled to speak. As a result, America's largest university campus was closed that night to someone seeking to speak out for constitutional freedoms.

Did the students riot again? Did they fill the streets or the Oval to vociferously support free speech?

No, they did not. A small number of students and faculty members protested --- and the Speaker's Rule was quietly abolished four years later.

But there was no real outcry. Free speech was not as important as football.

Is it much different now, three decades later?

How much debate was there at Ohio State when scores of colleges and universities across the country adopted so-called "hate speech" codes that sought to punish students and faculty members for saying things that others found offensive?

Why has it been necessary for the media, politicians and the federal courts to forcefully remind colleges and universities that they, of all institutions, should be fostering freedom of thought and expression rather than restricting it in unconstitutional ways?

Just as Novice Fawcett was well-intentioned in thinking he was protecting us from the dangers of ideological subversion, university presidents and faculty believe their actions to restrict disturbing speech now are protecting students from the pain of racism and sexism.

Academia *has* been trying harder than much of the rest of our society to do something about the intolerance and discrimination that still deny too many Americans *their* full freedom to pursue happiness, even on a college campus.

So it is understandable that university communities have wanted to do something about students or faculty members who intentionally demean and harass others.

It is understandable that they have tried to curb already discriminatory fraternities who stage openly racist and sexist events.

And it is especially understandable that many of the targets of these indignities have themselves decided that they just won't take it any more, even if it means demanding restrictions on the freedom of others on campus.

But violating one constitutional right to protect another ultimately threatens *all* of our freedom and undermines the foundations of our constitutional system.

It is at this difficult point that universities and their faculty and presidents must shoulder even more responsibility as intellectual pathfinders for our society. They must work to find ways to instruct us all on how free speech and free thought cannot and do not have to be sacrificed in the hard work of building respect for diversity.

This was stressed by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton in her recent commencement address at the University of Pennsylvania, where students' freedom of speech and the student newspaper's freedom to publish have been jeopardized by racial tensions.

"We must always uphold the idea of our colleges as incubators of ideas and havens for free speech and free thought," Mrs. Clinton said. "Freedom and respect are not values that should be in conflict with each other."

The first amendment to the constitution guarantees that Americans enjoy and exercise greater freedom of expression than any other people on earth.

Yet that freedom might appear more dangerous than ever in this mass communications-fed era of political correctness, multi-cultural debate, increasing racial tensions, energized women's, men's and gay movements, religious zealotry, talk show orthodoxy, and seemingly unbridgeable chasms on issues like abortion.

Angry speech and disturbing, even deeply offensive ideas abound ---- and are amplified by a multitude of media as accessible as your car radio or computer bulletin board.

In this highly charged atmosphere, it may not be surprising that some African-American students at the University of Pennsylvania recently seized and destroyed nearly 14,000 copies of the campus newspaper because of their anger at a student columnist who, among other things, accused the university and the government of giving preferential treatment to African-Americans.

But why was the university so slow and ineffective in making clear how wrong that was, especially on a college campus?

And why are all universities not making a higher priority of fostering the kind of meaningful debate about ideas in conflict that can lead to greater understanding and perhaps even some resolution --- rather than trying too often to silence unsettling voices?

Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist addressed this question in his recent commencement speech at Virginia's George Mason University, where punishment of a fraternity that staged an "ugly woman contest" had just been ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court.

Chief Justice Rehnquist said: "Ideas with which we disagree -- so long as they remain spoken ideas, and not conduct which interferes with the rights of others -- should be confronted with argument and persuasion, not suppression."

Donna Shalala --- my junior high school classmate from Cleveland who is now the Clinton administration's Secretary of Health and Human Services --- was president of the University of Wisconsin when it adopted a "hate speech" code that required investigation and punishment for persistent "explicit comments, epithets, or other expressive behavior" that any recipient found offensive.

After intervention by both a federal judge and the state legislature, the plainly unconstitutional and unenforceable speech code was eventually dropped.

Ironically, Shalala initially had it right --- *before* she agreed to the speech code --- when she said: "The First Amendment is not something that we can honor when we choose --- and disregard when we do not like what we hear. A great university is not a place to play with constitutional rights. University administrators cannot abandon those principles to satisfy the will of a few, or even of many, at the expense of civil rights guaranteed to us all."

Perhaps the clearest statement of the primacy of the First Amendment's protection of free expression in our democracy --- even in troubled, divisive times --- was made by U. S. Supreme Court Justice John Marshall Harlan during the Vietnam War in 1971. He wrote the majority decision that overturned the conviction of a man in a Los Angeles courthouse on whose jacket was written an obscene protest against the military draft.

"The constitutional right of free expression is powerful medicine in a society as diverse and populous as ours," Justice Harlan wrote. "It is designed and intended to remove governmental restraints from the arena of public discussion, putting the decision as to what views shall be voiced largely into the hands of each of us, in the hope that

use of such freedom will ultimately produce a more capable citizenry and more perfect polity and in the belief that no other approach would comport with the premise of individual dignity and choice upon which our political system rests."

Freedom of the press can be just as risky as freedom of speech.

A free press can fan the flames of discontent with government, intrude into people's private lives, reveal national security secrets, or provide the forum for furious debate of the most explosive issues.

Indeed, there is much being produced by my profession of which I cannot be proud -- from the smutty titillation of tabloid newspapers and television to a disturbing tendency by too many in the media to let their personal feelings influence news coverage. There is too much trivialization of the news in print and on the air in the interest of marketing and ratings to maximize profits.

However, occasional irresponsibility is the price we must pay for a truly free press.

In fact, it can be at those times when the press appears most irresponsible to some --- especially those with governmental or economic power --- that a free press is serving its highest duty in a democracy.

Treasonous colonial pamphleteers and newspaper editors challenging the perogatives of the English crown helped fire the American revolution.

Rabble-rousing abolitionist press voices helped set in motion the events, including the Civil War, that finally ended slavery in America.

Risky reporting of the civil rights movement in the south a century later helped end legalized segregation.

Skeptical reporting of official deceit during the Vietnam War --- including publication of the Pentagon Papers in defiance of the government --- helped extricate the country from its most divisive overseas conflict.

And persistent reporting by two young men at The Washington Post about what lay behind a mysterious burglary of the Democratic National Committee's offices in the Watergate building in Washington, D.C. ---- and whose stories initially were branded as irresponsible even by many in the media --- helped our constitutional system remove a law-breaking president.

Too many editors today worry when public opinion polls show the press to be losing popularity or to be appearing irresponsible when it gets under the skin of the body politic by questioning the status quo and by reporting what governments, private companies and some citizens seek to hide when they are up to no good.

"Who elected you?" we in the press are often asked.

The answer, of course, is no one. We are not running for election --- and we should not be in a popularity contest.

The constitutional right *and responsibility* given to a free press by the Founding Fathers is to *inform* --- no more, no less, and no matter what the consequences.

All of *you*, as you leave this cloistered campus today, have been given a similar right *and responsibility* by the Founding Fathers: to speak out and to act on what you think and believe --- and to assure others of the same opportunity.

During the wondrous but often terrible century now coming to an end, multitudes around the world have been enslaved and murdered for what they have thought, said or believed in.

You are truly privileged to have been born, raised and now educated in a nation constitutionally determined to ensure that all who live within it are truly free.

Yet we know that goal remains threatened by poverty, race and language differences, and religious and sex discrimination.

As you go forth from this most democratic of educational institutions --- a land-grant university --- you must shoulder *your* share of the burden of ensuring full freedom for all Americans.

You --- like I --- have no real choice. In this country, it is your *right* and it is your *responsibility*.

Good luck to you all.