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1987 Commencement Address: Sen. Bill Bradley (D-New Jersey)

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1987 Commencement Address

Senator Bill Bradley, New Jersey

Woody Allen once offered the following advice to a graduating class. He said, "Two paths lie ahead of you; one leads to utter despair and the other to extinction. May you have the wisdom to choose wisely."

I would like to offer my congratulations to all of you on this special day. Today you achieve a goal you set many years ago, and you and your families, can be proud of the hard work and accomplishment this day represents. I know that in the past few weeks you've looked forward to today and to the tomorrows that begin with this moment. I can remember studying for my final exams in college and taking a moment to look up from my books and gaze out the window and dream. I dreamed of the moment when I would hand in my thesis and finish my final exams and I'd be free. I dreamed about going to Oxford, reading novels, playing basketball, seeing far-away lands, and yes, about making the world a better place. That was over twenty years ago, but I'd bet on any spring afternoon I could walk into Dinand Library and sense a hundred dreams drifting in the air.

Today, you'll leave here with your dreams to face a world very different from the one I faced 20 years ago. And I don't just refer here to the fall of Bob Dylan and the rise of Bruce Springsteen.

By the year 2000, only one of the ten largest cities in the world will be in the U.S. Three will be in South America. Between now and the year 2000, only 50 out of every 1000 babies born will be born in the industrial world.

It is trite but true, the world is becoming a smaller place. Our economy is global and interdependent. Our ecology is intimately connected. As we stand here, huge quantities of data fly from computer to computer at the speed of light - more information than any man could hope to master in a lifetime, much less a nanosecond. Words uttered in Tokyo are heard in Washington almost instantaneously. And not only can we hear the voices of other nations, we can see their actions too. Nightly, the traumas and triumphs of the world are beamed into our living rooms. We can see the pain of plague and famine in Ethiopia. We can watch the peaceful yet powerful victory of democracy in Argentina, and we can hear the cry of black South Africans yearning to be free.

Yet computers and satellites are not merely recording and reporting the events in our world, they are affecting them. The world changes faster today than it did 50, or even 20 years ago, and this rapid change has produced great uncertainty. Governments change hands overnight. Fifty-point daily moves in the stock market are no longer considered unusual. And perhaps most frightening of all, in the next twelve months thousands of people will die from a disease most of us had never heard of just five years ago.

In such a rapidly changing world, our relationship with the Soviet Union has special importance. As we enter the 1990s, we can see a certain symmetry between our two countries. For the Soviets, just as for us, this is a time of uncertainty, great risk, and strategic opportunity.

Mikhail Gorbachev rules a country with rising infant and adult mortality rates and a public health system in which 13% of the deaths come from bad water. He presides over a stagnating economy whose only successful product is weapons. Yet, to remain a superpower in the 21st century, he must find a way to keep up with the unending movement of scientific and technological change.

In the summer of 1985, I was shocked when I sat around a conference table in Irkutsk, Siberia, and listened to a Soviet economist advocate the market-price mechanism as the means to allocate energy resources within the USSR. While this kind of change holds out the promise of a new order, it also threatens to destroy the old one. Decentralized economic power erodes centralized political power which, as Khrushchev discovered belatedly, has powerful constituencies in the USSR. So the Soviets face a strategic choice: either they cling to the established ways, relying more and more futilely on military power as their main asset, or they take the bull by the horns and permit their political economy to be transformed. In the final analysis, there is no middle ground. While Gorbachev believes that he can get growth and modernization without giving political freedom, it appears he might be unleashing forces which, after a point, he cannot control.

History teaches that times of tension and transition in the Soviet Union create both risks and opportunities for the rest of the world, especially the US. Why is this so? Because we, as their principal rival, are also a standard by which they measure themselves. Even the more haughty, self-confident new leadership who believe the real America is the paralyzed giant of the 1970s, still look to the US with a bittersweet mixture of fear, anger and admiration. As such, we have some influence, but only if we are wise enough and far-sighted enough to understand what our own goals ought to be.

As I see it, we want the Soviets to choose preoccupation with domestic reform over foreign adventures, military buildups and ideological crusades. Can we influence them to make this choice? I believe we can, but only if Western democracies have a far more unified sense of common goals than we've had in the past. And in forging these common goals, America has a special leadership role to play.

But before we can play that role effectively, we have to know who we are and what we want for ourselves and the world.

And now, that brings us to you - as you look out at this changing world. D. H. Lawrence once said, "It's never really freedom 'til you decide what you positively want to be." In other words, life is a matter of choices about yourself, your future and your obligation to those around you - your neighbors.

After all the discussions about political economy, the irreducible moral minimum that each of you must decide is what you owe another human being. By this, I don't mean what you owe yourself, or your family, or even your friends, but rather what you owe a stranger simply because he or she is a human being. Our religious traditions instruct us in this regard. So does the tradition of American political thought that emphasizes that one's personal welfare is tied to the general welfare.

Both of these traditions, religious and political, seem to say that part of being free is being responsible. Both seem to say that in seeking to meet the needs of strangers in our midst, we must be willing to limit our individual desires. Both seem to say that while government is constituted to protect one's right to individual pursuits, we must ourselves discipline those individual pursuits if we are to enjoy and participate in the richness of life offered by a just and humane community. Without the nurturing reassurance of a community, lonely liberty can end in self-destruction.

The issue of limiting desires will come up time and time again as you make your way in life. How much food do you eat? How many clothes do you need? How much money is enough? How much time do you work vs. how much time do you spend with your family?

In thinking about freedom and obligation, it helps to understand the ironies of modernity.

For example, Enlightenment thought has liberated us from superstition at the same time it has denied us the moral certainty of another age. The science which has unlocked the forces of nature and improved the physical condition of our lives has also given us the power to destroy the world. The personal liberty of our big cities, while invigorating, cries out for a new form of community, a new sense of belonging.

In short, the scale and speed of our lives have increased dramatically. But our most troublesome dilemmas still remain personal in terms of what we owe another human being and how we accept moral responsibility.

So what is the nature of that obligation in America? At a minimum, it is not to indulge individual freedom to the point that it crowds out someone else's chance for freedom; at a maximum it is to assume responsibility for the basic needs of your fellow man. Or as Lincoln said about slavery, "In a choice between man and the dollar, I choose man."

But ultimately, it is you - alone with your conscience, your intelligence, your life's experience - who determines what you believe you owe to the rural poor, to starving Ethiopians, to refugees from tyranny, to concentration camp victims or to the deinstitutionalized homeless who sleep on the street corners of our major cities.

Do you believe your responsibility to them is served by giving to charity which will try to serve their needs? Do you believe that providing food, clothing and shelter for them is a legitimate use of taxpayers' dollars? Do you believe that you should yourself go to work among the refugees of Southeast Asia or the street people of New York City? Or do you believe that you have no responsibility for anyone but yourself and your family?

How you think about the needs of strangers will determine the kind of society we become?

When the only grandfather I ever knew came to America, he went to work with his hands in a glass factory. There were Slavs and Greeks, Italians, Blacks, Germans and Irish working side by side. He wanted to do a good job and he worked hard. After work he lived for three things - first, going to the public library on Saturday to get two western novels which he would read while sitting on his front porch on summer nights listening on the radio to his second love, baseball. And his third love was telling his eager grandson - me - about the America he had seen. He felt that America ultimately worked because it was free and because people seemed to care about each other. In other words, there was an American community.

As each of you graduates today and goes your own way, I think you have some sense of a Holy Cross community and some anticipation about that American community.

I envy you for things you will see and know that my generation never dreamed of - maybe even a more stable, secure relationship with the Soviet Union.

I hope your dreams go beyond personal ambition and the accumulation of material goods. I want you to have a bigger ambition - an ambition that drives you to excel for the sake of excellence, not vanity - an ambition that forces you to decide what is right as much as what pays - an ambition that disciplines desires in order to meet needs. In short, an ambition for yourself as a citizen as much as a private individual; an ambition for yourself as a citizen who sees your own well-being tied to the well-being of your community and who believes that in the end what matters is how you've treated your neighbor.