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# Opheim High School Commencement

Max S. Baucus

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# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-2602

## "Opheim High School Commencement Address"

Senator Max Baucus  
Opheim, Montana

May 29, 1995

Thank you for that kind introduction. And I congratulate each of you graduating today. It's an honor to share this special day with you, your families and your friends.

Before coming here, I did a little research on the history and tradition of graduation ceremonies.

The first known graduation ceremony took place over 800 years ago in Italy. Montana's first graduation remains for our historians to uncover. But our first schools sprung up in the mining camps of Southwest Montana. So I suspect it was a no-frills ceremony in Nevada City, Virginia City or Bannack.

I do know, however, that here in America the first graduation occurred three hundred and fifty three years ago Harvard University. There were nine graduates at that first American commencement -- one more than we've got today. They sat through three addresses: one in Latin, one in Greek and one in Hebrew. And the event closed with a long debate on philosophy, conducted entirely in Latin.

You'll be glad to know I will give only one talk. A short one. But it will be in Latin ... just kidding.

### V-E DAY FIFTY YEARS LATER

You all probably saw and heard about the V-E Day anniversary at the beginning of this month -- the events marking the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe. It may be that your grandparents have told you something about the War. If they haven't, ask them; because you will learn something important.

Watching the V-E Day celebration myself, in the month when my own son graduated high school and I prepared for your commencement, brought something home to me. That is, in many ways you are a lucky generation.

You have a lot of challenges ahead. Montanans have to be better-educated, harder-working, in some ways tougher than ever before. You have to work hard to stay ahead. But you also have a lot to be thankful for.

When I was born, right around the beginning of the war, Opheim high school graduates had a very different set of choices ahead of them. They were not deciding whether to work at home on the farm or go on to college.

It was just a few months after Pearl Harbor. Quiet prairie towns were turning into military camps. A few miles down the road, the Air Force opened up the base near St. Marie to support our Lend-Lease military aid deliveries through Malmstrom Air Force Base to Russia. And Montana young people were signing up by the thousands as soldiers, sailors, Army nurses and Marines.

### HENRY SCHAUER

Three out of every five Montana farm workers went into the military. And these kids had to become heroes. Let me tell you about one of them.

Henry Schauer grew up on a farm near Scobey, just a few miles to the east. Like many of you, he spent his high school years at school in the day, and working on the farm on the weekend. And he was looking forward to a lifetime in agriculture.

The war put it on hold. Schauer spent four years in the Army, between 1941 and 1945. He was wounded in Sicily, spent five months in a hospital, and then returned to the Army to land at Anzio. During the battle in which the Allies recaptured Rome, he won the Medal of Honor by single-handedly destroying two German machine guns that had pinned down one of our companies.

That is the highest honor our country gives to its children. Only 431 of them were awarded, in years when thirteen million Americans went through the Armed Forces. And Henry Schauer picked up his medal, took off the uniform and went right back to the family farm.

### PRESERVING MONTANA VALUES

You might ask, why go into all that today?

You are growing up in an era of peace. You can make your future into whatever you want. It is a very different world.

But some things are still the same. But the values you have learned here are as important and in some ways as fragile as they were when Henry Schauer went off to war.

We in Montana have a tradition of civility and small-town decency.

We have a natural heritage of clean air, clean water and the world's best fishing and antelope hunting.

And we inherit a bedrock patriotism, and a belief in open government, freedom and democracy.

That is an extraordinary legacy. No sum of money could buy it. And its preservation depends on two things: on citizens who are informed and involved; and on a willingness to work hard, sacrifice, and think about the future.

Our natural beauty; a strong rural economy; above all, our safe, civil and democratic society, are the result of generations of people with these qualities. And they can be broken in pieces if we forget that.

### THE MILITIA AND FREEMEN

In the past year, we have got a good lesson in that. From the so-called "freemen" and "militia" organizations, we see bitter attacks on Jews and minorities. Intimidation of neighbors. Threats against law enforcement. And contempt for democracy. The very things Henry Schauer left Scobey to fight.

These people do not, of course, pose the dangers our foreign enemies did. But they remind us once again that the battle to preserve Montana values must be fought and won in every generation.

As we protect the rights that make our country so great -- the right to free speech and free association; the right to bear arms; the right to vote; the right to privacy -- we must remember the responsibilities that give those rights meaning:

The responsibility to respect our neighbors. To show our dissatisfaction with government at elections, not with threats of violence. To respect our sheriffs and police officers. To obey the law.

### HOME TOWN HEROES

And that in turn reminds us of something else. That is, you don't have to go overseas to be a hero. You don't have to leave home at all.

Because people right here at home are heroes. Every day, Montanans give of themselves to make our state the special place it is.

People in public service. Like Mayor Lowell Hallock, Police Chief James Bailey and Fire Chief John Marvine. Putting themselves on the line to keep the community running and keep their friends and neighbors safe. There is nothing more brave, more honorable, more heroic than that.

Your teachers. Every year they make sure Opheim's boys and girls go out in the

world able to compete with the kids from New York, Los Angeles, Tokyo and Beijing; understanding our Montana heritage; appreciating America's values and our democratic system. People like Superintendent Smith, who keep the system going for the benefit of the whole community.

And look at your own families. Many of your parents are lifetime farmers. And years of getting up at 4:00 and 5:00 a.m. on my family ranch have taught me that there is no job tougher or more demanding than agriculture. There is no finer calling than providing food and fiber for the world. And there is no sense of pride and achievement quite like that which comes from living, working and providing for your family on your own land.

My father was a rancher and a leader in agricultural organizations like the Wool Growers Association. He read constantly. I am sure he could have been whatever he wanted to be, but he loved the outdoors and thrived on the ranching lifestyle. My brother John has followed in his footsteps. He is a lucky man -- and all of you who will go into agriculture are lucky too.

## CONCLUSION

There are an infinite number of ways to serve your country, your state and your community.

Like I said at the beginning, I know your generation has some tough challenges. They may not be as dangerous as the challenges Henry Schauer faced. But in some ways they are even tougher.

In a world more closely linked by trade and technology than ever before, you have to keep up with the Class of '95 in high schools not just across America, but all over the world.

The next generation of Hi-Line agricultural producers has all it can handle with the young farmers a few miles north up Route 24.

We even have people in New York and Minneapolis who are nosing around like old-time gold prospectors, trying to find a place to dump their garbage.

But these are challenges we can meet. Montanans can outwork anybody. Montana's farmers produce the finest grain anywhere in the world. And no big city garbage salesman will make it one inch past the Dakota line if I have anything to say about it.

I know that when you give a commencement address, you're supposed to give advice. But I'll leave that to your parents and teachers. All I will say is that you have great opportunities ahead. I know you can make the most of them. And when you do, your future is as big as the Big Sky over our Great Plains.