

June 6, 2010

DRAFT COMMENCEMENT SPEECH,  
THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY, 2<sup>ND</sup> draft

President Gordon Gee, Trustees, Faculty, Families, Friends, Guests  
and most of all,

Graduates of The Ohio State University, Class of 2010:

Welcome to the biggest commencement celebration in the United States! What a wonderful moment. Here we are in a state that is the heartland of America, the home of presidents, a cradle of the Industrial Revolution. Here we are at a university of champions, a university with "the best damn band in the land", a university that takes as much pride in its scholars as in its athletes. And here we are to salute a class that many consider the best in the university's history.

Yes, this is a wonderful moment. Thank you for inviting me to share it.

I have had the privilege of working in the White House for four American presidents. But I can tell you that I have never had the privilege of working with a president any better than your own Gordon Gee. With a leader like Gordon Gee in the front office and a leader like Jim Tressel on the playing field, no wonder Ohio State graduates so many winners.

Now, Gordon, I have joined millions of others in watching you on You Tube. Any minute now, I expect you to leap out of your chair and lead us in a chorus of "Don't Stop Believin" right here in the stadium.

Preparing for this day, I was reminded of Art Buchwald, a humorist who for many years was one of the nation's favorite commencement speakers. Art died a while ago but people still remember how he closed every commencement address:

"We are leaving you a perfect world. Now, don't screw it up."

I wish I could deliver the same message today, but even Jon Stewart couldn't tell you that with a straight face. For this graduation, a more fitting message boils down to this: "We are leaving you a screwed-up world. Now, we need your help to perfect it."

You know from experience that job markets across the country, especially here in the heartland, are the toughest since the Great Depression. With so many young people seeking shelter from the storm, it has also become hard to get into graduate school. Non-profits, too, are turning away hordes of applicants. The threat grows that the United States – just as Japan did earlier – could be entering a long, lost decade of painfully slow progress. Excruciating decisions lie ahead as we try to balance our financial books and put our country aright.

Even as we focus on fixing problems at home, the world won't stand still. Hopefully, we are on our way out of Iraq and Afghanistan but a nuclear Iran could be just around the corner. Meanwhile, nations like China and India are rapidly gaining on us. When historians look back, they may well say that the biggest, most important story of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the shift of power and influence to Asia.

Indeed, I have come to believe that the transcendent question for all of us is whether America will remain a great nation or slide slowly into decline. That's why it is so important that we get about the business of fixing America – restoring our vitality as an innovative, entrepreneurial, free people.



So, we are facing stern times – some would say dark times. What does this mean for you, the graduates of today? And what does it mean for your generation?

No one can offer you a clear roadmap – you will have to bushwhack through the brush on your own. You must make your own discoveries, your own mistakes, your own triumphs. But perhaps you will find, as I have, that you can learn a lot in hearing and reading about others who have already been down life's paths. They can often shed light on your own.

My favorite advice about life comes from the prophet Micah 6:8: "What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God."

My wife Anne and I also enjoyed the wisdom that we heard from President Jerry Ford as he celebrated his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. Now Jerry Ford was from Michigan and helped lead their football team to the National Championship twice. But he was a good man and should be forgiven. As he turned 90, Jerry said that his mother had taught him three rules in childhood and they served him well all his life: "Work hard, tell the truth, and come to dinner on time." Good, simple Midwestern rules for complex times.

In that spirit, let me offer three brief lessons of my own that seem particularly relevant to those of you graduating today – and to your generation that I so much admire.

First, I would urge that as you enter these tough times, do not see adversity as your enemy. Learn to make adversity your friend.

One of the most memorable passages from the dark days of the American Revolution was written by Abigail Adams. She sent a letter to her teenage son, John Quincy, telling him, "These are the times in which a genius would wish to live. It is not in the still calm of life, or the repose of a pacific station, that great characters are formed. The habits

of a vigorous mind are formed in contending with difficulties. Great necessities call out great virtues... qualities which would otherwise lay dormant wake into life and form the character of the hero and the statesman."

If you take time to read biographies of great men and women in the years ahead – as I hope you will – you will discover that every single one had failures and sorrows in life – and had to struggle hard to overcome them. Among our presidents, Lincoln had repeated defeats and by middle age, thought he was finished and had no future. Fortunately, he was no quitter. Teddy Roosevelt lost both his wife and his mother in the same night. He was so sad that he could not bear to hear his wife's name spoken again and went west to the wilderness. But he, too, came roaring back.

Franklin Roosevelt was struck down by polio at 39, and spent the next seven years trying to walk again. He never could but he fought his way back into public life. Harry Truman came from a family so poor that he couldn't go to college; he worked seven years behind a mule on the family farm. But he turned himself into a self-educated man, one of the best read ever to live in the White House – and stubborn as his mule. John Kennedy had several close brushes with death – priests said last rites over him four times – but he still dared to be president. Ronald Reagan took a bullet within an inch of his heart –and walked away with a smile.

What does one find in common among these presidents? That all of them endured times of adversity. But they also faced their troubles with inner fortitude and eventually grew from the experience. Against their nature, they learned patience, spending years in the wilderness before making it to the top. And somehow they maintained a sense of humor to ward off their inner doubts. Lincoln in the darkest days of the Civil War opened a cabinet meeting with a funny, off-color story; his



cabinet officers looked aghast. "Gentlemen, why don't you laugh? ...If I did not laugh I should die, and you need this medicine as much as I do."

Finally, our leaders all had a sense of optimism about themselves and about the country.

Ronald Reagan loved to tell a story of two boys on Christmas morning, one a pessimist the other an optimist. The parents told the pessimist to open a bedroom door to find his big present. He did, and there was a shiny new bicycle. The boy burst out crying. Why, asked his stunned parents. "Because the bike is sure to get a flat tire soon, and I won't be able to ride it anymore." The parents told the other boy, the optimist, to open a different bedroom door. He did and there he found mounds and mounds of horse manure, stacked up to the ceiling. The boy burst out singing, "Oh, I am so excited. Somewhere in here there just has to be a pony."

So, I ask of you that as you enter this tough job market – with so many difficulties ahead -- please do not flinch. Do not run from adversity; make it your friend. There's always a pony in there somewhere.

Second, let me suggest that you have spent your school years studying the world around you, the external world. I hope that your curiosity will encourage you to continue asking about the outer world all your life. But with graduation, the time has come to focus with equal intensity on the world inside you, your inner world.

The most important journey you will make in life is not up a career ladder but into your own soul – learning who you are, what makes you tick, what values you want to live by. That is the journey to authenticity, to becoming a whole person – and eventually, to success.

A few years ago, when Barack Obama was serving in the U.S. Senate, I visited him with a group of students. They peppered him with questions about how he built his career. "Look," he told them, "you

can't plan out your life. What you have to do is first discover your passion – what you really care about – and then work hard at it. Soon, you will find that you don't have to seek out jobs and titles; they will come to you."

Isn't that essentially the same philosophy that Coach Jim Tressel is instilling here with his famous Block O of Life? He urges players to first find their purpose in life and then to define the goals by which they can reach them. The central questions, as he argues, are to ask, "Who are you?: and "What defines your purpose?" And to remember, "Before I can do, I must be."

For the past decade, I have been privileged to develop a relationship and now a friendship with the chairman of your Ohio State board, Les Wexner. Most of you know his legend: how he worked his way through Ohio State, borrowed money from his aunt to open a store and has built an empire. What you may not fully appreciate is that Les is also a serious student of leadership, reading and reflecting all his life. His central conclusion is that in order to make a difference – in order to lead – one must first become a whole person. It's not just your professional skills that you must develop but also your integrity, your commitment to family, and your commitment to serving your community. He believes, as novelist Walker Percy once put it, "You can make all A's and still flunk life."

I made similar discoveries working in the White House. I had grown up in an academic family – my dad was a mathematician – so that I always believed that the smartest person would make the best president. I soon learned I was wrong. My first president was Richard Nixon. He was then and remains one of the smartest people I have ever known – easily the best strategist. But Nixon also had a dark, angry side. Demons were raging deep inside him, and he never learned to control them. Eventually they erupted and brought him down in



tragedy -- I was there in the East Room when he resigned and even wrote his brief, farewell letter.

A few years later, I had the privilege of working for Ronald Reagan. He was nowhere near as book smart as Richard Nixon. While Nixon loved biographies of Benjamin Disraeli and to watch George C. Scott play General Patton, Reagan loved the westerns of Zane Gray and watching *The Sound of Music*. Reagan knew his stuff but he also had accomplished something Nixon did not: he made himself into a man of character. He was not just comfortable in his own skin – he was serene. And he embodied old-fashioned, Midwestern values – integrity, a sense of fair play, a contagious optimism about the future. To paraphrase what was once said of Charles DeGaulle, Ronald Reagan was not great because he lived in America; he was great because America lived in him.

So, as you begin your journey after Ohio State, I would ask that first, you work on becoming a whole person – a person of honor, character, authenticity. Know who you are, your purpose and your passion. Know, too, that you must learn to master yourself before you can serve others.

Finally, I would ask that as you move forward, you think about more than yourself and your family – think about your country, too. We are, as I have said, a nation that is severely challenged. And we have lost much of our faith in our leaders – in politics and in business. Decline is in the air. I cannot remember a time when our problems seem bigger and our capacity to solve them seemed smaller.

Frankly, we need you to step up and serve. For some years, I have been teaching members of your generation in my classrooms. Yes, some fit the negative stereotypes, but I have seen many others who are idealistic, passionate, and bursting to go out and change the world. You can see them here at Ohio State: Some are social entrepreneurs, eager to work for non-profits – Teach for America, City Year, KIPP, Year Up,

Project Health. Others have just come back from Iraq and Afghanistan, seasoned by combat, knowing what it is like when lives are on the line, realizing how trivial some aspects of college life can seem. What unites them is a passion to serve and to lead.

We have seen what can happen when a generation steps forward. In the 1930s, millions graduated into an economy wracked by the Great Depression. They not only had trouble finding jobs but went on to fight in a war that threatened civilization. Through common sacrifice, they came to love this country and they came home to build it to heights never imagined before. President Franklin Roosevelt said of these men and women that they had “a rendezvous with destiny,” and we look back upon them now with great nostalgia – calling them, in Tom Brokaw’s words, “the greatest generation”.

I tell you here today that you, the Millennials, represent the most promising generation in decades. You, too, have a rendezvous with destiny. And you have it in your power to become the next great generation – one that rescues America in a time of troubles.

As graduates of one of the nation’s finest universities, you have already moved to the forefront of this quest. I join others in asking you today, upon your graduation, to make a private pledge to yourself that you will live up to the possibilities that you represent. When the bugle has sounded, generations in the past have answered the call. Now the bugle calls for you.

You will not find the going easy, but you will be supported on your path by the friends and family sitting next to you today. To your left and right are the men and women whom you have eaten with and dreamed with for four years. They will not vanish when you pick up your diploma. When you see them again in the “real world”—and you will, more frequently and unexpectedly than you can imagine—when you see them again, they will remind you of the promise and excitement of this moment. Do not forget that promise. For I promise



you, if you throw yourself into the arena on behalf of America, your life will grow rich with meaning and purpose.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, who was wounded three times in the Civil War and lost many friends, said later of his generation, "Through our great good fortune, in our youth, our hearts were touched with fire. It was given to us to learn at the outset that life is a profound and passionate thing."

Graduates of the Class of 2010:

Life is a profound and passionate thing. As you leave here today, I hope you will learn to see adversity as a friend, not as an enemy.

I hope you will search within yourselves to create lives of passion, character and authenticity.

And all of us ask that your hearts be touched with fire, as you rise to help your country.

We are leaving you a screwed-up world; now, we need you to fix it.

Good Luck, God Speed – and Go Bucks!