

Speech by Edward H. Jennings
The Ohio State University Commencement
Friday, June 8, 1990
Ohio Stadium

I am delighted to have the opportunity to be your Commencement speaker. I am aware that some of you might have preferred to hear the President of the United States, or, perhaps, Barbara Bush. Others probably were hoping for Bill Cosby. And still others might wish your Commencement speaker was that notable underachiever, Bart Simpson!

More than likely, a few years from now, you won't remember who it was anyway. I must be honest with you that while my undergraduate Commencement day was, indeed, memorable, I don't remember the name of the person who spoke at that ceremony. And yet here I am, more than thirty years later, charged with the duty of being your Commencement speaker. I am sure that most of you at this moment don't care who is delivering the required commencement speech -- just so long as it is short! It will be.

Today is a memorable occasion in the life of our great University as we recognize your achievements and reaffirm our purposes. This also is a memorable day for each of the graduates -- a rite of passage.

As graduates, over the last few weeks, you have no doubt been thinking about the past -- your first day at the University, the long lines, the good friends you have made, the special faculty members who have encouraged you along the way -- and, perhaps, a few who have nearly kept you from being here!

And, while graduation day is a time for reflection, so too is it a time to look ahead. Today, I want to focus on the future.

You are graduating at an incredibly exciting time. Whatever your field of study, graduate or undergraduate degree, age, or country of origin, all of you will see and be a part of some extraordinary events.

Who can imagine what lies ahead? Consider for a moment the changes we have seen during this past year. Who could have predicted just last fall, as you were beginning your last year at Ohio State, the changes that would take place in Eastern Europe or in Africa? That Nelson Mandela would walk out of prison, that the Baltic States would clamor for independence, that the Berlin Wall would crumble? Who could imagine that we would have Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles?

The pace of change is fast, and its implications enormous. What will the future hold for you? During my lifetime, the lifetimes of my parents and grandparents, there has been conflict in Europe. Now we are witnessing in Europe the development of a common currency, common passports, an enormously important economic community, and the opening of the Warsaw Pact countries to our ideas of freedom and democracy. With the easing of tensions between east and west, our global focus will perhaps shift to conflicts between north and south. And maybe -- just maybe -- during the next few decades, we will be challenged to manage peace.

Moreover, I have no doubt that as we usher in the 21st century, we will move dramatically closer to solving the riddles of the heavens, the creation of our universe, the mysteries of our species, and the fundamentals of matter. The future, indeed, will be filled with challenges and with opportunities -- great opportunities.

But your role as an educated person is not to try to predict the future. As the French author Saint-Exupery said in The Wisdom of the Sands, "As for the future, your task is not to foresee it, but to enable it." You cannot predict what will happen. But as an educated person, you can make things happen.

What is ahead? The only certainty is change. And those who will succeed in the future will be leaders who are comfortable with ambiguity, with disorder. The tolerance for ambiguity will be a strength for the future and is a hallmark of the educated person.

The greatest gift of your Ohio State education is arming you with the skills to engage in a lifelong pursuit of knowledge, and inspiring you to use these skills. Too often, students enter the classroom expecting to find answers. And yet, given the sweep of change over the last century, to give our students only today's answers is to severely handicap them for the future.

A good teacher challenges students with contradictions more than certainties, with dilemmas rather than dogmas. Here at Ohio State, you have not received all of the answers. In fact, if our faculty have truly succeeded, today you have more questions than answers.

Your university education at all levels, but particularly your undergraduate education, has given you, we hope, the fundamental skills for life, the skills needed to deal with a changing, disorderly, ambiguous world: the ability to communicate, to reason, to analyze and to integrate material. You have learned to find and use information. You are capable of making critical judgments and acting ethically on new information. You have learned to organize your ideas and

communicate them. You have tested the limits of your knowledge and continue to seek connections that expand our human potential.

Such capabilities will prepare you for the uncertain future. And as educated women and men, you must not be content to predict the future. Your responsibility is to shape it. Indeed, the word "education" is derived from the Latin "educere," which means "to lead out." It is your opportunity and your duty to lead our society intellectually and morally into the next century.

And truly, there is no limit to what you can do. Just as educated women and men in times gone by have conquered geographic frontiers, and later conquered some of the frontiers of space, so too can you conquer the modern frontiers of technology, of science, and of the human condition. I challenge you, above all, to do the great things, not the ordinary or the easy.

Everyday each of us hears too many naysayers and critics who quickly tell us what is wrong in our world and why something can not be done. I challenge you to seek greatness and to accept the responsibility for addressing today's concerns by thinking about tomorrow.

When the development of a superconducting supercollider is discussed across this nation, critics frequently question the value of such an expensive scientific undertaking. These debates remind me of the discussions surrounding the early days of the U.S. space program. President John F. Kennedy summarized our goals for the space program in his 1962 State of the Union Address as follows:

Our aim is not simply to be first on the moon, any more than Charles Lindbergh's real aim was to be the first to Paris. His aim was to develop the techniques of our own country and other countries, in the field of air and the atmosphere, and our objective in making this effort, which we hope will place one of our citizens on the moon, is to develop in a new frontier of science, commerce and cooperation, the position of the United States and the free world.

The benefits derived from the space program are many, some as important as increasing our understanding of the atmosphere and others as practical as Velcro and Teflon. By accepting the larger challenge of putting an American on the moon, we received benefits that were unimaginable at the time. In most cases, the greatest advances are those which are unplanned and unanticipated.

Kennedy went on to observe:

We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one we are willing to accept. . . .

As an educated person, well prepared by your Ohio State experience, you must, I believe, continue seeking answers, even though we know that the answers will at times be unnerving and often will be unexpected. You must pursue answers even when that pursuit inevitably will give rise to many more questions. This is the nature of becoming educated -- intellectual curiosity and the willingness to keep asking questions.

Furthermore, you should continue to seek the answers to the most challenging questions of our day. The architect and city planner, Daniel Burnham, said, "Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir [our]. . . blood and probably themselves will not be realized. Make big plans; aim high in hope and work."

I charge you, as the leaders of the early 21st century, to accept the big projects and embrace the larger challenges. Not because they will be easy -- they will not. But because in so doing, you will shape a future for yourselves and for all humankind that is truly bright.

Again, congratulations and best wishes in the pursuit of big plans and great endeavors.

Thank you.