

*Brown's remarks, as prepared for delivery, can be found below.*

So, I gotta think that some of you may see me, with the grey hair, the suit – a member of the generation who saddled you with climate change and student loan debt and economic policies that work for fewer and fewer people – you may sit there looking up at me and think, “*okay boomer.*”

And let me assure you, I wouldn't really blame you. I won't pretend that previous generations knew better than you do. We learn from our past, but we don't romanticize it.

In the 1950s, 95 white men and one white woman couldn't pass Civil Rights legislation. The good old days were not all that good for a whole lot of people.

In fact, I get asked a lot about how bad the state of our politics is today, and one response I often give is, hey I know things seem bad, but trust me, the 1850s were much worse!

We were fighting actual slavery, not just the legacy of it.

And yet even in the darkest of times, the seeds of progress are planted.

One of the best ideas was brought to life by Congressman Justin Morrill –probably a familiar figure to all of you, whether you lived in Morrill Hall or visited the Land Grant Taproom.

He was the son of a blacksmith from a small town in Vermont, and his formal schooling ended at the age of 15. Yet he managed to educate himself on a wide range of topics, from art to architecture, from finance to education.

He had the radical idea that higher education should not just be available to the sons of the wealthy – and back then they really did only mean “sons,” another knock against those with their rose-colored glasses on. Congressman Morrill thought higher education should be for “the sons of toil” as well.

He understood that our economy, our democracy, and our country would be far stronger if higher education were widespread. And thus the seeds for the Land Grant system were sowed.

Now it's true that the issue of slavery consumed Congress and the country while Morrill was dreaming his big dreams. And it spilled out in ways you might not expect.

Southerners thought the land grant system threatened states' rights – the shibboleth of those down in Dixie who clung to their wealth and privilege built on an abomination. So when Congress first passed the Morrill Act in 1859, southerners persuaded President James Buchanan to veto it.

But three years later, it became law. Eight years after that – 150 years ago – THE Ohio Agricultural and Mechanical College opened its doors.

And southerners certainly had reason to fear where expanded higher education might lead.

The second Morrill Act, passed in 1890, helped strengthen and transform the Historically Black College and University system, in the midst of the metamorphosis of the system of slavery into the racial terror of Jim Crow.

As we celebrate the sesquicentennial of this storied institution this year, it's worth reflecting on this history – on the vision of the children of farmers and mechanics and laborers being afforded the same opportunity as those of land-owners and industrial barons.

Think about how far we've come in expanding on that vision.

Look around at the class of 2019. The sons of 1870 might be scandalized to see the diverse, vibrant hundreds in this hall today – the immigrants and the veterans, the parents and the first-generation college graduates.

Your class is a reflection of our state today – 48 veterans and 52 active-duty servicemembers. One-in-five of you are students of color. A quarter of you are the first in your family to graduate from college.

That is a credit to Dr. Drake and his vision. Because of his work and his commitment, unlike higher education classes around the country and in previous decades, OSU's classes are looking more like America. He has understood that for this institution to succeed for the next 150 years, we need to honor its founding ideals by expanding on them.

It's my hope that this school can build on Dr. Drake's legacy.

As Justin Morrill noted:

“Under a free government the nation acquires rank, not by a few daintily-polished individuals...but by the intelligence and majesty of the entire community.”

I don't think anyone would ever accuse OSU graduates of being “daintily-polished.”

Now, all of you are now part of that “majesty of the entire community.”

So no pressure or anything.

It sounds daunting, but I have faith in all of you.

On the subject of intergenerational warfare, one of the most tired tropes in the media today has to be that millennials or Gen Z don't work as hard as past generations.

But the data has made it clear – you are some of the most civically-engaged, active young people we've seen in a long time.

One 2015 study of college freshman – when I'm guessing some of you started – found unprecedented levels of student activism and political engagement.

And let's face it – you've been handed kind of a raw deal. Climate change. Soaring inequality. About to impeach a president. Looks like we're going to need you to put that degree to work.

Luckily, young people have never been very good at quietly accepting the hand they've been dealt.

We know who has been the engine behind movements for change throughout history. Alexander Hamilton was 21 years old in 1776. John Lewis was 23 when he spoke at the March on Washington. Martin Luther King, Jr. might have seemed ancient to him, at the august age of all of 34 years old.

Little has changed today.

Look all over the world – from the campuses of Hong Kong, where protesters stream into the streets and face tear gas and worse, demanding democracy – to high schools here at home, where students as young as 14 walked out of classrooms in a March for Our Lives, demanding their country protect them from gun violence.

It's Greta Thunberg, saying to the UN, "We will not let you get away with this...change is coming, whether you like it or not."

It's young employees at the failing tech company WeWork, standing up to executives to demand the severance pay and health care they earned, writing, "we don't want to be defined by the scandals, the corruption, and the greed exhibited by the company's leadership... We are asking to be treated with humanity and dignity."

Humanity and dignity.

If you take two words with you out of this hall, out of this historic campus, and out into the lives you're about to build for yourselves, let it be those.

A commitment to our common humanity and common dignity.

Those are the values on which this school was built 150 years ago – the idea that the daughters and sons of the industrial heartland have every bit as much potential as the children of Wall Street.

And they're a creed to carry with you throughout your lives – in your neighborhoods and your churches and your families and your workplaces.

I talk often about the Dignity of Work, but that's not a term I came up with.

The phrase comes from Dr. King.

He understood the deep connection between civil rights and workers' rights, and said that, "Whenever you are engaged in work that serves humanity and is for the building of humanity, it has dignity and it has worth."

As divided as our country may seem, work is something we all have in common – we're all trying to do something productive for our family and our community and our country.

As you embark on the next phase of your lives, work with dignity. Work with purpose – whether it's in a business or a non-profit, whether it's in public service, or caring for family members at home.

And recognize that common dignity in those around you – whether they're your coworkers, or the people who clean the office, or who put food on your plate.

We're all in this together.

None of you reached this moment on your own. You all know the village that got you here.

As you leave this hall today, I implore you, thank your village. Thank your parents or your spouses or siblings, of course – the people you're going to celebrate with tonight.

But don't stop there.

Think right now about two people who helped set you on the course that enabled you to walk out of here with a college degree or a Master's or a doctorate – maybe a high school teacher, or an aunt or uncle, or a coach, or a Girl Scout or Boy Scout leader.

Commit right now to calling them tonight and thanking them, and telling them how much their mentorship meant to you. I guarantee you it will make their day – it might even make their month, or their year.

And commit to being that inspiration, that mentor, for someone else.

It's my hope that 10 or 20 or 30 years from now, you will all get that call from someone who is standing where you are today, calling to say, "thank you – because of you, I'm now a graduate of THE Ohio State University."