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Tom Brokaw

Commencement Address at Emory University



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Thank you all very much, especially those of you who are graduating. But as a parent, let me say to those of you who are gathered around the perimeter of this felicitous setting: Remember that today you're not just gaining a college graduate in your family; you're regaining a checking account.

I'm very happy to come back to Atlanta. It was one of the most important stops in my career. I was a young man working in Omaha, Nebraska in the mid 1960s when I received a call, and I was summoned to Atlanta to work at WSB. It was, for me, the beginning of a real education about the South.

Now there were some things that I had to learn once I got here. I had to learn it was not Ponce de Leon, it was "Ponce de Lee-on." I had to learn that it was "Howston," not Houston. I had to learn to say "hey," not "hi." I had to learn to love biscuits and gravy and butterbeans with a little fatback. I especially learned to love chili dogs at The Varsity. But I never found a taste for boiled peanuts in all the time that I was here. Most of all I came to appreciate and love the many layers of this rich culture in the Southeastern part of the United States, and especially this city, because I was witness, first hand, to the defining moral of our time, the struggle for civil rights.



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And when people ask me now about my most memorable moments in a broadcasting career, I often refer to those days in the dark of night in America, in Selma, in Haneyville, Alabama and other places where there was a great conflict between those people who were determined to keep the old ways and those people who were determined to have the rule of law in America apply to people of all colors. The great courage that I saw then stays with me now.

So much has changed. When I was living here, Peach Tree and Sweet Auburn were really separate universes. But people of goodwill were determined to advance the great cause of civil rights and the great cause of this great city and all of its institutions, including Emory. The struggle is not over. We are doing much better, but as you leave here today you must keep that rich heritage in your mind as well.

Let me also say to the graduates that it's a great pleasure for me to be standing before this graduating class. In recent years, I've delivered Class Day or commencement addresses at Yale, Harvard, and Duke. And it's a relief to come here, because at those institutions I had to speak much more slowly and use much shorter words than I will have to here today.

And I know, as well, that southern hospitality is alive and well. Before I came down here I was invited to spend the night at the Pi Kappa Alpha House. But I wandered the campus last night: Has anyone seen the "Pikes"? I don't know what happened to them here in the course of the last year.

Take a moment and take in this setting. This is the realization of the American Dream. These cherished ceremonies are, for me, annual rituals of renewal. I come to these academies across America with a sense of awe, humility, and envy -- awe, that the American Dream is so fully realized in these environs, where the working class and the privileged mingle in common pursuit of learning and advancement, where immigrants, fresh from foreign lands, had equal claim to economic opportunity and rule of law in our great system. And, if they choose, they have the privilege of taking their newfound skills back home.

I'm also humbled by the sacrifices of so many who have helped you to this promising place in your lives, your family, your teachers, and some that you may not have considered this moment. There are, as we gather here, young men and women in uniform, in harm's way, in far off places, who are dedicating their lives to your security and you must remember them, as well, on this occasion.

I'm also envious of what you carry from here. More than the degree or honors, what you will come to treasure are the friendships and the fellowship, some of which will accompany you the rest of your years. I envy you the experience of exploring new frontiers of knowledge, while rediscovering the ancient truths. Most of all, I envy you the road ahead, the 21st century with its transformational technology, emerging democracies, developing economies, shifting power centers, and yes, cultural conflicts demanding great attention.



These are the themes of commencement speeches across the broad spectrum of campuses this spring, and I am fully prepared to expand on them momentarily. But first, I am compelled to offer somewhat less lofty, but useful observations. You have been hearing all of your life that this occasion is a big step into what is called the real world. "What," you may ask, "is that real world all about?" "What is this new life?" Ladies and gentlemen of the class of 2005 at Emory, real life is not college; real life is not high school. Here is a secret that no one has told you: Real life is junior high.

The world that you're about to enter is filled with junior high adolescent pettiness, pubescent rivalries, the insecurities of 13-year-olds, and the false bravado of 14-year-olds. 40 years from now, I guarantee it: You will still make a silly mistake every day. You will have temper tantrums and you're feelings will be hurt for some trivial sleight. You'll say something dumb at the wrong time. And you will wonder at least once a week, "Will I ever grow up?" You can change that. In your pursuit of your passions, always be young. In your relationship with others, always be grown-up. Set a standard, and stay faithful to it.

In this new life, you'll also have to think about money in a new way. Life, after all, is not an ATM. Now you have to earn the money. Think about how you can hang on to some of it, and if you're fortunate use the money that is beyond what you need to save a life, to save a neighborhood, to save the world.

You may be surprised to learn that it is that use of money that is the most satisfying and gratifying. In our family, where we began with no money, we like to say that we have discovered that God invented money so those who have it can help others. Moreover, while money helps, it is discounted, somehow, if it doesn't carry your full personal value and commitment.

A few years ago in a ceremony similar to this, I declared, "It's easy to make a buck, but it's tough to make a difference." A father of one of the graduates, a Wall Street success, wrote to me suggesting a rewrite of that line. He said, "It's tough to make a buck, but if you make a lot of bucks you can make a hell of a difference." A or B? You decide because there is no wrong answer.

But before you get to that, let's assign your class a marker and explore the consequences. The marker, of course, is 9-11, the terrorists attack on America, the worst single, physical assault in this nation's history. You are the class of 9-11. You have the dizzying experience of entering college as your country was beginning a shooting war, as a clash of cultures and ideals was altering political, and economic, and spiritual landscapes far beyond these sleepy environments.

You found sanctuary here in the comforting certainty that if you played by the rules, this important passage in your life would be successfully completed in four years. Alas, there is not a comparable orderliness about the other passage, the rough ride as a result of the horrific events of 9-11.



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We are still working our way across open water, forced to navigate by the stars, as the old navigational charts are of little use to us. Our destination remains uncertain. Some seas have been rougher than expected. Certain forecasts proved to be perilously wrong. And unexpected currents keep pushing us closer to dangerous shoals. Our direction is not of our choosing. It is time, as they say at sea, for all hands to be on deck, for this is a common journey and it requires a common effort and a collective wisdom of the crew and passengers alike.

Your individual dreams and plans will be seriously compromised if the ship of state is allowed to drift or steer a hazardous course. We cannot pretend that simply because there has not been another 9-11 that the world is as it once was. We are not near the end of this epic struggle between the Western ideal of the rule of law, tolerance, pluralism, and modernity, and, the advocates of a crazed vision of Islam.

We cannot wish away the complex set of conditions that fuel a rage across a broad band of the globe, where too many young men and young women your age are caught in a cross-fire of claims on their faith -- and another way of life playing out on the ever-wider screens that reflect the images of a world that they don't understand, of unveiled women and material excess, secular joy, disconnected from their lives of deprivation and uncertainty.

They don't represent the whole world of Islam, but they represent a great band of Islam. They are not incidental to the world that you are entering. They are the fastest growing population in an already over- crowded part of the world, where self-determination is at best a work in progress, or at best a faint rumor, or a distant promise. For most of the 20th century Christianity represented 30 percent of the world's population, and Islam represented about 20 percent in the closing days. By the year 2025, those numbers will change.

Many of those young people -- and I have encountered them in Afghanistan, and Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia, the universities in Bagdad, in Indonesia -- understand our culture and speak our language, but to them, we show no interest in returning the favor. So many of them love the idea of America, but hate our government, envy our freedoms, and deeply resent what they see as our sense of entitlement. The worst among them had to be punished, and the fight goes on, but no army can conquer them all or force them all to change.

So as you leave here in pursuit of your dreams, try to imagine their dreams. Stand tall. Don't apologize for what you have or what you believe in, but get to know what they don't have and why. Take the lead in establishing a common ground between generations, a common ground of appreciation and understanding, a shared destiny of self-determination and economic opportunity. See the ancient Arab culture as something much more than just a pipeline from their natural riches to our insatiable appetite for energy.

This is a place to begin, but fair warning: It will be hard work, challenging, stimulating, frustrating, and hard. For this common ground cannot be found in a piece of software on your laptop computer. It is not hidden in the settings on your toolbar. There is no delete button for intolerance, no insert button for understanding. This new technology that defines your generation is a transformational tool, but, as a tool, really it's only an extension of your head and your heart.¹



It will do us little good to wire the world if we limit our vision.

It will do us little good to wire the world if we short-circuit our souls.

No, the world still requires, everyday, personal, hands-on, be-brave, speak-out individual courage.

We, as the most powerful political, military, and industrial super-power ever imagined, requires citizens, more than ever, who understand that "patriotism" means to love your country, but always believe that it can be improved -- and that improvement comes not exclusively from the Left or the Right, but much more often from the Center, from the arena of public debate and participation, where ideology always has a place, but where ideological bullies must be confronted. If we present ourselves to the world as the patrons of democracy and the oxygen that it requires -- free speech without fear of punishment -- then we must be the vigilant stewards of it at home as well.

We have another obligation. It will do us little good to export democracy and economic opportunity, to use our military power wisely and efficiently, to nurture tolerance and cross-cultural appreciation if we wind up at the end of the day on a dead planet. Mindless consumption of the basic resources of this precious place we inhabit is a form of blasphemy and suicide -- nothing less.

In my generation, we have been witness to the power of awareness of an environmental consciousness and the modest triumphs of renewal, but we continue to lose ground and clean water, creatures large and small at an alarming rate everyday. Slowing the destruction and reversing the damage does not require sackcloth and hobbit huts, but it does require imagination and temperance. It does require a re-definition of convenience and need. It does require you and all the rest of us to love our mother -- Mother Earth -- and live our lives in a manner that will allow future generations to know her succor and wonder.

Let me conclude by briefly sharing with you another generation of young Americans. Sixty years ago this spring and summer they were beginning to return home to restart their lives after more than a dozen years of brutal deprivation, sacrifice, separation, death, and grievous wounds. Sixty years ago, Nazi Germany and imperial Japan were defeated in a great war by these young men and women your age and their allies -- in a war that has been described by the British military historian John Keegan as the greatest single event in the history of mankind.

These young Americans had come of age in the Great Depression, when life was about deprivation and sharing clothing, and shoes, and food, and jobs, and what little money a family could muster. Children dropped out of school in the eighth grade, not to buy a 110-dollar pair of sneakers, but to put food on the table, or to pay for medical care for their mothers and fathers.



Ragged bands of hungry men rode the rails, looking for any kind of work. Families left their dried up family farms for hard labor in California; city kids slept four to a room in a walk-up apartment. Banks failed and hope had to be renewed every 24 hours. And just as these young people, your age and younger, were beginning to emerge from those dark and difficult days, they were summoned to the great cause of defeating Nazi Germany and imperial Japan.

These young men and their families answered the call with alacrity. In 1938, America had been the 16th military power in the world. But overnight, we stopped the production of civilian vehicles and began the production of tanks, and war planes, and heavy bombers that were drawn by night and produced by day. Young men went from being bellhops in Rochester, Minnesota to flying multi-engine bombers in nine months. City kids went to sea. And everywhere in America everyone joined in by making one kind of a sacrifice or another.

And when they answered that call, they were forced to fight their way across North Africa, the deadly beaches of France and Italy, in the freezing winters of central Europe, in the searing heat of little-known islands across the South Pacific. On all the seas and all the skies, day in and day out, they fought bloody, face-to-face battles of unspeakable cruelty and death.

At home, farmers grew more food and civilians ate less so the soldiers could be well-fed. Young wives and children didn't see their husbands or fathers, or hear from them, for months at a time, if ever again. Women left the house and put on overalls and work boots and hard hats and carried lunchboxes and went onto the assembly lines.

When that great war was over, when the terrible, hateful evils of the Third Reich and imperial Japan had been defeated, this generation of Americans, your age, returned to their homes or established new communities. They went to college in record numbers and they married in record numbers. They gave us new laws expanding the freedoms of those who had been left behind too long.

They did something that never been done in the history of warfare. They rebuilt their enemies. They gave us new art, new science, and new industries. They gave us great institutions like the one that you enjoy here today. They gave us no less than the lives that we have in this country now.

They did not lay down their arms and say as they could've, "I've done my share." Instead, they came home and became immersed in their communities and their churches and their schools. They ran for political office, for mayor, and for governor, and for Congress, and for the Senate, and for the Presidency. They formed service clubs and they never gave up on the idea of "common cause" and their role in it.

Some are here today in their distinctive gold robes. They're looking on with pride and humility at the promise of your generation -- the opportunities available to you that would have been unimaginable to them. I call them, "The Greatest Generation." They asked so little of us, and yet we owe them so much.

Remember them as you leave here.



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Remember how they rose as one to meet far greater challenges than we face today.

Remember them, as you put the mark of greatness on your generation.

Good luck and Godspeed.

¹ Marshall McLuhan popularized the idea of human technologies, particularly communication technologies, as extensions of the human body. Thus, the wheel is an extension of the leg, print an extension of the eye, radio an extension of the human nervous system itself.