

BOB SCHIEFFER

SOUTHERN UTAH UNIVERSITY COMMENCEMENT SPEECH

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Distinguished guests, members of the faculty, proud parents and grandparents, and surprised brothers and sisters who never thought these guys were smart enough to get this done and of course, to the members of the graduating class of 2017...welcome and congratulations.

I want to start today the way the late Helen Thomas would start. Helen was the first reporter I met when I came to Washington, we covered a lot of campaigns together and we covered the White House together when Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford were there.

One day in 1975, when President Ford was there, it was announced that Henry Kissinger who was both National Security Advisor and Secretary of State would be coming to the White House briefing room to give a backgrounder.

The press secretary told us that Kissinger had only twenty minutes not a second more and we would have to be content with that.

Kissinger, ever the ham, said, “Well, I am a college professor, I’m used to talking for 40 minutes, I don’t know if I can do it in 20 minutes to which Helen responded. “Then start at the end!”

So let me start at the end—the lead to this story—the most important thing to say is this:

Class of 2017, this is your day! You worked for it, you earned it and when you get that diploma, no one can take it away from you.

So congratulations! Enjoy it!

Graduation is a day that holds special meaning for each of us—parents, faculty, students, even the graduation speaker.

May I say to the Moms and Dads: this is your day too.

What a feeling it is to know that you are the parent of a college graduate. I am the father of two of them and I tell you when they walked across that stage, I felt like... well, to tell the truth... I felt like I had just gotten a substantial pay raise.

May I also say to the graduates, until you sit where your parents sit today and see your own children walk across the stage you'll never know how proud they are. So can we just stop here for a minute and say thank you to the parents.

And since I am a few years and a few miles down the road ahead of you, may I offer one piece of advice to all the parents here: stay on good terms with your kids. The most important thing for you to remember today is your kids are the ones who will pick the nursing home.

I also have a confession. A graduation speech is one of the easiest speeches there is to make because there is no pressure. I have been to a lot of graduations in my time and I can say this with certainty: no one has ever remembered anything a graduation speaker says.

There is a reason for that. Graduation is not about what someone says. It is about what you have done. So you will not remember much of what is said here.

But you will always remember this day.

All of your adult lives you have been students. For the past four years—for some of you a longer time—you have been students at Southern Utah University.

But when you leave here today, you will be graduates of Southern Utah University!!

And that has a nice ring doesn't it?

It's also a little scary but it's supposed to be. I know because long ago and far away at a place called Texas Christian University in Fort Worth I got my diploma as you are doing and I have a confession.

I did not graduate magna cum laude.

For me it was “thank you lawdy!”

I was terrified that day and for a reason.

I had specialized in Spanish —not majored in it but specialized, taking it, dropping it, taking it, and dropping it. In the end I had to take nine semesters to fulfill the four semester requirement.

The final grades had been mailed but not posted by graduation day, and even as I stood in line to receive my diploma, I was worried that I would be pulled out of line and told I hadn't passed that final semester course.

So for me, graduation day was a religious experience. I discovered there was a God.

Kindly, old Dr. Rominengi who had been my Spanish professor apparently believed that mercy took precedence over justice and he gave me the “C” I needed to graduate.

So in Dr. Rominengi’s honor may I just say, Gracias a Dios!

So, now that you have reached this milestone, what’s next? I wish I could tell you otherwise, but you are graduating into a world that is perhaps more dangerous than at any time since the Cuban missile crisis.

We hear a lot these days about our crumbling infrastructure, but I want to talk for a minute about something that is in worse shape than our roads and bridges, and that is our electoral system—the way we select the people who govern us.

When I was a little boy, my grandmother thought I would grow up to be president of the United States, and do you know why?

Because that is what every grandmother thought her grandson would grow up to be president.

But I ask you this: how long has it been since you heard someone say, “I hope my child grows up to be a politician?”

You are more likely to hear someone ask how to get an appointment with Kim Jung Un’s barber.

Such is the disdain with which the political class is held.

We have made the process of getting elected to public office so odious that too many serious, qualified people no longer want to be a part of it. What we are left with is—too many times—no longer our best and brightest but those who are willing to spend the countless hours begging people for the massive amounts of money it now takes to run for even the most insignificant office—not bad people for the most part, but not always those most qualified.

Every year, our campaigns set new records for spending and the cottage industry that has grown up around our campaigns once again made a lot of people rich—and I mean that literally.

Perhaps that is one reason that last year, after what I believe was the worst campaign in modern history, the system produced for the first time in modern history, two candidates that majorities of Americans neither liked nor trusted. So how did we get from there to here?

To give you my idea of how that came about, let me go back to another time and tell you about the first politician I ever saw.

It was 1948 and Lyndon Johnson was running for the United States Senate and we heard he was coming to the vacant lot where we played baseball on the North Side of Fort Worth. I was 11 years old. It was a big event and so my Dad took me down to see him. The reason it was a big event was that we heard he was coming in a helicopter and we had never seen a helicopter... and then there it was, this airplane without wings and over this electronic bull horn, this voice in the sky:

“This is Lyndon Johnson and I’ll be down to see you in a minute.” And then it landed in a swirl of dust and he got out, made a rousing speech, and at the end threw his hat in to the crowd, boarded the helicopter and flew away. What a scene.

I told the story years later to Jake Pickle who was a long time Texas Congressman and he said, “Oh yes, that was my job in the campaign. I was the hat catcher.”

I said, “What?” And he said “Lyndon was the tightest man on earth. He wasn’t going to waste a hat on a political rally so it was my job to drive to where ever that chopper was going to land, I’d get on the front row and when he saw me he’d throw the hat to me, then I’d run around to the back of the chopper, give it to him and they’d fly off to the next stop.”

I love that story because it is such a contrast to the politics of today. In those days, people who helped and ran campaigns had real jobs.

They helped because they liked a candidate, or thought they would get something out of it or they just liked politics. They were all amateurs.

Today, we have outsourced all the jobs they used to do for free to an enormous hoard of consultants, gurus, strategists and I don’t know what else, and they have grown into an enormous multi-billion dollar cottage industry that has made American politics the most expensive politics in the world.

As this cottage industry grew, it was the beginning of the great divide that has come to separate those who run for office and those they purport to serve.

When LBJ came to our neighborhood, we got to see him but he got to see us. Today’s politician depends on consultants to tell them who the people are they purport to represent.

When the people who used to do all this for free were on the winning side, they shared the thrill of victory and what comes with winning. But when they lost they had to go back into the community and live with the loss. Today, these consultants who design these awful campaigns don’t have to worry about that—they just collect the money and move on to the next campaign.

My friend Tom Friedman, the New York Times Columnist, told me of going to a convention of advertising people and they were talking about various ad strategies and someone talked about the use of negative advertising. If Burger King really wanted to sell more hamburgers than McDonald's they should go negative, went one strategy—allege that McDonald's hamburgers contained ecoli bacteria or rat dropping or some such. A wiser voice explained, "We're not trying to destroy the industry to the point that people will stop eating hamburgers, we're just trying to sell more burgers than McDonald's."

I wonder if that's what we have managed to do in politics.

Is the negativity of our campaigns destroying our political system rather than just helping or hurting individual politicians?

There are many reforms—some easy, some not so much, that we must bring to our political system: redistricting reforms, financial reforms.

By 1975 in the wake of Watergate, 32 individuals had gone to prison or paid substantial fines for campaign law violations. Today, everything they were found guilty of is legal. We are going backward, not forward.

But the first step to political reform is political courage and that is where you come in.

I urge you to not only consider public office but to think seriously about running for office—whatever your party preference or political persuasion is not important. What is important, what our system needs, is an influx of smart, serious young people who understand that the point of government is to improve the lives of our citizens. Those who understand the words of that great fictional detective Harry Bosch when he says, "unless everybody counts, nobody counts."

The great worry of so many in public office is that they might do something that will cause them to get a primary opponent in the next election.

Do any of us really believe that was the concern of those brave people who founded this country?

They faced challenges far greater than those faced by today's leaders but they were not worried about political survival, they were worried about being hanged and yet they pledged their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor to a cause greater than themselves, what became the United States of America.

A superpower cannot remain a superpower when its government remains in constant gridlock because its elected official's main concern is that they may face a primary opponent.

When Lyndon Johnson took on his own party against unbelievable odds to pass the 1964 Civil Rights Bill and someone asked why he was willing to risk his own political survival to do it, he said, "Because that's what the presidency is for."

Every generation faces its own challenges and no challenge comes without risk.

You are here today because of the courage of generations who were some of the most courageous people in the history of the world, who were not afraid to cross oceans to get here and not really sure what was in store for them once they arrived, who were not afraid to cross this great continent, who confronted the Nazis, the greatest evil the world has ever known, because they knew that if they did not, their children would live in a new dark age.

To meet the challenges of your time you must begin by restoring our politics to the place it used to be—the place where honorable people come together to work out the ways to improve the lives of all our citizens; the place where our best and brightest want to be.

If you remember nothing else I have said today remember this: You are fortunate because you are an American and America is a place where dreams still can come true and you must always work to keep it so.

Treasure always those who encouraged you to follow your dream—they are your true friends. And forget those who tried to talk you out of it. They are not worth worrying about.

Remember as well, to help those who have been less fortunate than you—and there is a great difference in helping them and advising them.

Herman Melville once said, “Of all the preposterous assumptions of humanity over humanity, nothing exceeds most of the criticism of the habits of the poor by the well housed, the well warmed and the well fed.”

In this age of contradictions where it’s so hard to believe in anything, believe in yourself. You can do that by remembering why you feel so good today.

It's not because you have a piece of paper that says you've graduated.

It's because you set out to do something and you did it.

It's because you have enriched your intellect by learning things you didn't know and because you enriched your life with the friendships that always come from a shared experience of a worthwhile task.

So do your best, expect much of yourself and remember always: true greatness comes not from the battles we win but the battles we choose to fight.

You’ll soon forget what I said today, but you’ll remember always what you felt today.

I thank you. The world needs you.

May God bless you.