

Commencement 2014

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Congratulations, everyone. The Class of 2014 will always have a special place in my heart. This is my last graduation as dean, so I feel as if I'm graduating with you. I know I'm in great company, and I am honored to share this day with all of you.

It seems like only yesterday that you arrived in Morningside Heights. Since then, you have read and highlighted hundreds of pages. You have started using esoteric Latin words in everyday speech. You have eaten an astonishing amount of pizza. Like more than 150 classes that have come before you, you now go out into the world.

Each class has encountered a world that was changing, sometimes in dramatic ways. For example, 100 years ago, the class of 1914 experienced the cataclysm of World War I, which Columbia University historian Fritz Stern called "the first calamity of the twentieth century . . . from which all the other calamities sprang." Seventy-five years ago, members of the Class of 1939 saw World War II begin in Europe a few weeks after they graduated. On a more optimistic note, graduates in the Class of 1964, who are celebrating their fiftieth reunion this year and marched with you today, graduated a month before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was enacted. Twenty-five years ago, the Class of 1989 graduated just after a wave of protests broke out in Tiananmen Square. Five months later, the Berlin Wall came down.

I'd like to focus especially on the past 25 years, since this represents most (or all) of your life so far. Raise your hand if you were born in 1989. Now, raise your hand if you were born after 1985. This means the movie *Back to the Future* is older than almost all of you. "Of course," you are thinking, "that's a really old movie!" Your parents and I are cringing at this thought.

Anyway, those of us who saw *Back to the Future* in 1985 can tell you that the world has changed in remarkable ways since then. In 1989, we obviously did not have cell phones, texting, TiVo, or Netflix. Personal computers were new, and most of us didn't have (or even know about) email. Live-streaming, Skype, and social media would have seemed like a futuristic fantasy.

In 2014, these conveniences of modern life are available to billions of people – not just in wealthy nations, but all over the world. Indeed, over the past 25 years,

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a wave of innovation and prosperity has swept much of the globe. This is an inspiring thought, which bodes well for the future.

The world has also become more inclusive. In the United States, our leaders are more diverse than ever before. You all know that Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Class of 1959, is the second woman to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court, and she also was a trailblazing advocate for gender equality. Our graduation speaker, Robbie Kaplan, Class of 1991, is also an accomplished advocate, whose recent victory in the *Windsor* case helped establish new constitutional protections for same sex marriage. Robbie's former law partner at Paul Weiss, Jeh Johnson, Class of 1982, played a central role in repealing the "don't ask, don't tell" policy when he served as General Counsel of the Defense Department. Now Jeh is the first African American to serve as Secretary of Homeland Security. Meanwhile, Eric Holder, Class of 1976, is the nation's first African American Attorney General.

Not only has the world become more inclusive and prosperous during your lifetime, but it also has become safer in important ways. The risk of another world war receded significantly around the time you were born. Most of you don't remember the Cold War. Twenty-five years ago, I was working on a master's thesis on this conflict. The Cold War was going strong when I started the paper, and it was essentially over by the time I finished it. I actually suspect that my paper single-handedly brought the conflict to an end, but I haven't been able to prove this—at least, not yet.

There also has been a dramatic reduction in crime in the United States. Here in New York City, for example, there were 1,905 murders in 1989. In 2013, there were 333. That's an 83 percent decline, which is a stunning change.

U.S. dependence on energy imports has also been a major challenge during much of your lifetime. But we've seen a fundamental shift in the past five years. The U.S. is now the largest natural gas producer in the world, and it is expected to become the largest oil producer by the end of the decade.

I cannot convey how wildly improbable this all would have seemed 25 years ago. It was inconceivable that the U.S. would become an energy superpower, or that New York would be one of the safest cities in the world. It would be like predicting that *Game of Thrones* and *Cutthroat Kitchen* would join forces to create a reality TV show about cooking in the Seven Kingdoms.

But in many cases, the unimaginable has happened, and your lives are better for it. I'm sure we all understand that the law has played a central role in these developments. A wise and just legal system keeps us safe, ensures that

diverse communities live and work together in harmony, and lays the foundation for the innovation, creativity, and hard work that leads to a better life for everyone. In virtually all of these areas of progress, Columbia Law School graduates have led the way.

Soon it will be your turn. But although many good things have happened in the past 25 years, we face a host of daunting new challenges as well, so that your generation has your work cut out for you.

For one thing, there are questions about U.S. economic leadership and, more generally, about the pace of global economic growth. After a severe downturn, the U.S. has been mired in an anemic recovery for several years. Our economy is growing at about 2 percent, instead of the 4 or 5 percent of past recoveries. Unemployment has declined not so much because many jobs are being created, but because people are leaving the labor force. The challenges are similar in Europe, while economic growth in Asia is slowing as well. The difference between 4 percent and 2 percent growth may sound a bit arid, but think of the human tragedy behind these numbers. Millions of families across the world are not realizing their dreams of a better life. The challenges are especially severe for those with less education. We need to fix this. Instead of pork and polarization, we need better tax and regulatory policies to encourage more investment, higher productivity, and more jobs. With wiser laws, we can create better opportunities for millions of people.

Like the global economy, the global order itself seems more fragile than it did only a few years ago. We've seen terror attacks not only in New York and Washington, D.C. in 2001, but more recently at an Algerian gas plant, the U.S. embassy in Libya, the marathon in Boston, and other places. The civil war in Syria and the conflict in Ukraine are tragic and destabilizing, and there is also the specter of nuclear proliferation in Iran and across the Middle East. This could mean a heightened risk of nuclear terrorism for the United States and our allies. We need wise leaders and the right legal system to preserve our security while also remaining true to our ideals.

In the coming years, then, there will be changes in the world—both good and bad—that will help to shape your life. But my point today is that the reverse is also true. Your life will help to shape changes in the world. A degree from this magnificent law school empowers you not just to make a living, but to help make life *worth* living for everyone.

You should use your professional energies to imprint your values on the world. You can make your mark in a broad range of ways. Prosecutors aim to

keep the people safe, while defense lawyers put the government to its proof, checking abuses of state power. Deal lawyers bring people together to innovate and create. Academics seek truth, while judges pursue justice under law. Each of these roles—and a host of others—offers fulfilling opportunities to remake the future.

I can't promise that you will always succeed, but I can tell you that the effort itself will be rewarding. By hitching your professional star to what you believe, you will be a part of something more than yourself. Over the course of your career, you will undertake challenging assignments, some of which will be controversial. This means that at times you will be unpopular with some people. Be sure you believe in what you are doing. It can be unpleasant when others disapprove of you, but it is intolerable when you disapprove of yourself. As Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes, Class of 1884, once said, "A man has to live with himself, and he should see to it that he always has good company." So never make compromises about your integrity. No exceptions.

Fulfilling your goals will require a great deal of hard work. As Abraham Lincoln said, "Things may come to those who wait, but only the things left by those who hustle." Sometimes the goals will be more inspiring than the means, since even the worthiest missions involve routine tasks. Winning a landmark litigation or closing a high profile transaction involves late night conference calls, detailed "to do" lists, and careful proofreading. Likewise, while raising children is one of life's greatest privileges, it involves not only coming to their graduations, but also shuttling them back and forth, doing their laundry, and packing their lunches.

While I am on the subject, I will conclude by reminding you of something you already know. As important as your professional life is, there is nothing more important than your family and friends. You will be very busy in the coming years, and this means it will take more effort and commitment to preserve these relationships, but make sure you do. The people close to you will be understanding—as they have been during your busy time at Columbia Law School—but be sure you keep them in your hearts and in your lives.

So enjoy this wonderful day. You deserve it. On behalf of the faculty, I congratulate you on this milestone and thank you for the pleasure of your company. Please stay in touch with your friends at Columbia Law School. We expect great things from you.