

QUO VADIS?

Remarks by

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at Northeastern University

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President Curry, graduates, ladies and gentlemen.

A Commencement is a very special time. It is special to you recipients of degrees because it is the culmination of years of hard work and the beginning of a new period in your lives when you seek to put what you have learned to work. It is a special time for families and friends who are proud of your achievements and are looking forward to your future successes. It is also a special time for recipients of honorary degrees. For me it is particularly gratifying because of my high regard for this great university and the tremendous academic contribution it makes to Boston, the Commonwealth and the nation. Thank you for this great honor.

It is not uncommon for commencement speakers to burden their impatient audiences with lengthy recitations of the lofty achievements of their generation, and then, with sometimes apparent misgivings, pass the torch to the

graduates and challenge them with something that amounts to "can you top that?"

Indeed I am very proud of much of the record of my generation:

-- We won a war for survival in the Forties and then helped our shattered and defeated enemies to rebuild their economies and societies and rejoin the family of nations in good standing.

-- We fought valiantly in two other wars with far less well-defined objectives and with less well-defined outcomes.

-- We built the world's greatest economy and presided over a technological explosion that made the computer our most important servant. Technology also took us to the moon, launched the space shuttle, sent Voyager II to Neptune and beyond, licked polio and made organ transplants routine surgical procedures, although cancer still resists our massive efforts to find a conclusive cure and the scourge of AIDS spreads unchecked.

I am proud that my generation had a part in those achievements. But I am deeply ashamed of our failures. If

these failures are allowed to continue at their present rate, they may undo all that has been accomplished.

And, that's where you come in. I am not here to pass the torch of our successes and challenge you to beat our record. I am here to confess our failures and challenge you to clean up the mess we have left.

The mess is pretty bad. Consider that the nation's capital, Washington, D.C., where I now work has had more than 300 homicides already in 1989 -- one of the highest rates in the country. The police estimate that about 80 percent of the murders are drug-related. Marijuana, heroin, cocaine and crack are openly dealt on the streets and some parts of the city are unsafe for pedestrian travel after dark.

Washington is a convenient example because it is where I work and it is the capital. It should be a shining example of what is best about America. Instead it is a representative example of one of our worst problems, rampant in many other cities as well.

There seems to be no question that drugs, their distribution and abuse, are a root cause of escalating crime rates and urban decay. That the problem is out of control is well illustrated by the spectacle of a sovereign nation,

Colombia, in which the gangster elements who run the drug trade can openly challenge the government and warn it to keep hands off. We have poured billions of dollars into the drug problem and it has only gotten worse. My generation has failed you on that one.

Another prominent feature of urban life today which represents a failure of our society is the pathetic plight of the homeless. Every street corner in Washington which has a ventilator grate discharging warm dry air has one or more homeless persons, sometimes families, huddled around it to keep from freezing in winter and to dry out after rains in summer. Some of these people have jobs, but the jobs don't pay enough for them to be able to afford shelter. Others are unemployable and some perhaps ineligible for public assistance or incompetent to obtain it. We have thrown billions at this one, too, and haven't made a dent.

Maybe of all our nightmare failures education, both public and private, is the worst because the consequences of our failures in education will handicap future generations and further frustrate them in finding answers. We will spend \$353 billion on education in the coming academic year, an increase of 81 percent in just nine years. And yet tuition costs in privately endowed colleges and universities are rising so rapidly that even with generous student aid and scholarship programs, a degree from those institutions

may be slipping out of the reach of some of our best students. More shocking and much more worrisome is the collapse of public school education, particularly in the inner cities. Boston is a frightening example but it is just one of many. Almost 40 percent of those in Boston who enter 9th grade drop out of school before graduation. Yet Boston spends more per student than most other cities. That's a special tragedy in the city which was the birthplace of free public education.

If poverty, joblessness and homelessness are most prevalent among minority urban populations, then it follows pretty clearly that the failure of public schools to prepare inner city kids to compete in the economy perpetuates their plight and may even make it worse from one generation to the next. We really blew that one, and I don't know anyone who has a fresh idea of how to fix it.

Finally, we have the sorry spectacle of our rapidly decreasing competitiveness in the world economy. Our leadership in technology has eroded. Our leadership in productivity has evaporated. We depend on the rest of the world to finance our deficits. Our savings rate is less than one-third that of the Japanese. We seem to have lost the will to deal with our problems. We are unwilling to spend less on government and government programs, but we are also unwilling to accept tax increases to pay for them. So

we must borrow from the Japanese or others to make up the difference. Elected officials are preoccupied with getting elected and re-elected, and the special interest groups who finance those elections are able to override sound public policy in exchange for their support. The news is full of appropriate examples every day.

The challenge to you is to turn this thing around -- to clean up the mess that we have left.

Are you put off by the magnitude of that challenge? I hope not. You ought not to be. You have everything going for you to be able to meet it head on -- and win. You have a superb education, and your generation has demonstrated a greater concern for the world around you than mine did 40 years ago.

Now bear with me while I indulge in the speaker's privilege of being avuncular.

A few reflections then on why we are in this mess and a few pieces of gratuitous advice to you who must clean it up.

My generation has been too passive by far on public policy issues. We have been reluctant to sully ourselves by mixing it up with politicians. We have been preoccupied with making money and spending it conspicuously. In fact,

we have been so focussed on material success that the end has begun to justify any means to gain it. And our amorality has spilled over into the political process to the extent that decisions by elected officials on public policy issues are often made in consideration of campaign contributions rather than the public interest. When a campaign for a Senate seat can cost several million dollars and a House race may cost many hundreds of thousands, it is not hard to understand the weight those contributions carry. The result is that public regard for Congress, state legislatures and politicians in general is at a low point, in some cases bordering on contempt,

The old tried but not necessarily true remedies resorted to by my generation in dealing with tough problems have not worked. For much of this century our big problems, whether social or economic, were routinely dealt with by more government intervention and more spending. The result is government so bloated at federal, state and local levels that much of the spending is simply to support the apparatus set up to administer it, and less and less gets directly to the problem being attacked.

The so-called "drug wars" are one example. Public housing is another. Dozens of public housing projects bravely thrown up as recently as 20 or 30 years ago have been abandoned or bulldozed. They were so institutional in

design that no one could feel at home in them and the hopelessness of the inhabitants assured their decline. And yet, with all of that, we have people living on the streets.

And where are we as a country in the global economy? Still at the top, but the trend lines aren't up. The thirst for short-term financial gain has dampened our willingness to invest for increased productivity to assure future growth and competitiveness. We are so absorbed in the opportunity for windfall profits in takeovers and leveraged buy-outs financed with junk bonds that we have lost sight of the fact that these transactions regularly extinguish corporate equity and require the dismemberment of vital enterprises to meet debt service requirements.

Graduates, the old ways are not working to solve the problems we face. They may, in fact, be making them worse. We need new approaches, renewed creativity and a powerful commitment on your part to become involved. Resolve, I beg you, not to be couch potatoes on public issues. Vote, write, talk, shout if necessary, but make yourselves heard. Create new approaches and demand that they be tried. It will take courage, because change is always traumatic.

For example: Could we improve the composition of our legislatures and other elected institutions if we put statutory limits on the length of election campaigns for all

offices, limited the amount to be spent on a campaign and financed it all out of public funds at a fraction of current costs? Wouldn't that go a long way toward disarming the special interests?

Give some thought to our housing problem. If public housing is badly designed and has a life expectancy of a fraction of private housing, should we be devising ways to incent private capital to build affordable housing -- perhaps through subsidies or tax advantages that would be only fractionally as costly as many of today's failed programs?

I am deeply disappointed that my generation has not had more success in dealing with these great issues. But, I am supremely confident that your generation can and will deal with them and with all the new ones which will spring up along the way. Truly the world is your oyster, but you may have to use a lot of energy and ingenuity to open its shell.

Congratulations and God's speed to you all.