

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY

Press Center



Remarks of Secretary Lew at the Commencement Ceremony for the Georgetown University McCourt School of Public Policy

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As prepared for delivery

WASHINGTON - President DeGioia, Dean Montgomery, Faculty, Trustees, friends, family, and above all else -- the first graduating class of the McCourt School of Public Policy -- the class of 2014. Congratulations.

Thank you for inviting me to celebrate with you today and thank you for this honorary degree. To the parents, relatives, and families who have endured much during this journey, you are owed a debt of thanks -- for your support, understanding, and patience.

To the graduates, I commend you for your accomplishments. You finished all the papers, you passed all your exams -- and together, you survived Professor Schone's problem sets. Yes, you have worked hard. And from what I have heard, you have also spent your share of time at the Tombs.

I know the paths that brought you here have not always been easy. Some of your classmates have worked full-time while carrying a full course load; others had to live apart from loved ones on the other side of the globe. Many of you are already veterans or now serve in our military -- thank you for your service.

By working hard, keeping at it, and sweating the details, you have shown you have what it takes to succeed. I congratulate each of you on this tremendous achievement. Whatever path you follow as you go forward, you will always be reminded of how valuable this investment is. I am a Georgetown graduate myself -- Law School, 1983. And even though I have only spent five of the last 30 years practicing law, that training has been a valuable foundation throughout my professional life.

My career -- largely devoted to government service and public policy -- has put me in places and situations that, as a child, going to public school in Queens, New York, I could never have dreamed of: negotiating across the table from Senators, sitting beside and advising Presidents confronting enormously consequential challenges, and traveling the globe meeting with world leaders on behalf of the United States.

My entire career has been animated by an education that unlocked not just a world of knowledge, but more importantly, an ability to keep learning that will always stay with me. And so will your studies here propel you forward for the rest of your life, and in the pursuit of public service or whatever path you follow, give you the chance to make our world a better place. President Teddy Roosevelt once observed that life's greatest gift is the opportunity to work hard at work worth doing. You are fortunate now to have such an opportunity.

Preparing for this commencement, I considered delivering remarks on economic growth, or laying out a framework for increased global economic stability. But this special moment is a rare chance to say something a little more personal. So rather than detailing a policy prescription, I would like to reflect on the importance of public service and the special opportunity to pursue a path that has been so defining in my own life.

In the 1980s, years I spent rushing from the halls of the Capitol to the halls of Georgetown for class, we thought we were living in the most partisan era ever. As it is human nature to look back on the past a bit nostalgically, today those years are remembered as a halcyon period of bipartisan cooperation. The truth is, back then, despite sharp differences, and bruising politics, policymakers were determined to get things done. Compromise was valued. Facts were important. And personal relationships were seen as critical.

While attending school at night, I worked by day for Speaker of the House, Thomas P. O'Neill, Jr. -- a big bear of a man known for his shock of white hair, fondness for cigars, and endless pride in his Irish heritage. He was an old-style politician who was profoundly passionate about the working class, the sick, and the poor. "No way are we ever going to let them down," he would say.

Mr. O'Neill had deeply held beliefs about policy, but also believed that in our democracy it was important for a majority in Congress to work its will. There were a number of times when his own Democrats were not so sure the Speaker should let the House vote on key elements in President Reagan's conservative economic program, fearing they might pass. But he believed the one thing the American people would

not tolerate was obstruction. And sometimes, after a hard fight, legislation he opposed made it through, when Democratic members bucked the leadership and voted with the other side.

At those moments, it felt as if the Speaker had lost control of the House. But Mr. O'Neill remained steadfast. He believed strongly that the worst thing you could do was throw sand in the gears of the system and cause the whole enterprise of government to break.

After a rocky start, with painful losses – things changed. Mid-term elections preserved a divided government, but shifted just enough seats so the only way to get things done was to work together.

In the years that followed, I had the privilege as a young staffer, while still at law school, to work on a series of historic bipartisan efforts -- from Social Security and tax reform to immigration reform. Reagan and O'Neill, a conservative Republican President and a New Deal Democrat, were able to find a path to move the country forward -- together.

The thing about President Reagan and Speaker O'Neill was that they could get along with each other despite vastly different economic philosophies and world views. Both believed deeply in our country and democracy. They also forged a friendship that enabled them to leave behind a historic legacy.

I know that many of you look forward to careers in public policy, but I imagine some of you are not so sure about government service. One need only turn on the television to see shows like *Veep*, *Scandal*, and *House of Cards*, where depictions of Washington focus on this city's darker side. Unfortunately, this is not just a phenomenon in popular culture. While these popular shows present a picture of ruthless and sometimes corrupt ambition, far worse than the reality, at the same time, they also show leaders, who, often through outrageous means, do manage to get things done – something that real occupants of these offices have found more challenging in recent years. In real life, gridlock and partisan fights, more than personal scandal, have contributed to a loss of faith and a rise in distrust.

Now, some may say that bipartisanship is the currency of a bygone era. That we cannot come together to take on the broad, deep-rooted problems we face today. But I disagree. I have watched men and women of conviction reach across the aisle to secure honorable compromises my entire career. I have been a part of almost every major bipartisan budget agreement over the last 30 years. And I am optimistic that the things that divide us are not as intractable as they look.

Consider the last six months -- a two year budget deal, agreement to avoid a crisis over the debt limit and a farm bill all suggest that the pendulum is swinging back to getting things done in a bipartisan way. And I believe that on issues like education, infrastructure and immigration reform -- the same will be true.

If we need evidence that our country can still accomplish big things -- one need only consider health care reform. It took nearly a century for Congress and the President to come together to pass legislation that would expand coverage and change the system. But despite the odds, the Affordable Care Act became the law of the land, and now millions of Americans who were once denied coverage—including students and new graduates—have health insurance and can get the vital medical care they deserve. In fact, because of this law, students here at Georgetown and across the country can get health insurance after they graduate either by staying on a parent's plan or through the law's marketplaces – and each of you should make sure you are covered!

The lesson that I learned decades ago from Speaker O'Neill is still true today. The American people with all their different views expect and deserve a government that can do better. They expect those of us who are honored to serve to get past partisanship to solve problems. And when the American people choose a divided government, they expect us to work out our differences.

And that is where you come in.

President George H.W. Bush put it this way: "There is nothing more fulfilling than to serve your country and your fellow citizens and to do it well. And that is what our system of self-government depends on."

This is not a simple task. You will have to figure out a way to avoid the well-designed traps of cynicism and doubt. We live in a polarized time, where people who think differently often do not come into contact with each other. This is not just about the media -- where the rough texture of nuance is smoothed away while ideologically-driven web sites, cable TV, and bloggers cater to narrow audiences in closed echo chambers. We are also at a point where even neighborhoods are partisan bubbles. It is actually unusual these days for a Democrat to live next door to a Republican.

But if any generation can break down those walls, it is yours. Your generation is redefining how America views itself and the world. And that is why I am excited for you and all that you will accomplish. This generation may have been molded by some of America's darkest events -- September 11th, Hurricane Katrina, and the financial crisis -- but you have a rare sense of confidence and resilience. According to the Pew Research Center, you are more optimistic about the future than your parents were when they were your age.

The students at the McCourt School of Public Policy embody those virtues. Your classmate, Colin Huerter, has teamed up with researchers to combat an insect that plagues coffee bean farmers in Rwanda. Kristina Rosinsky has been taking classes in the evening while advocating for kids in the juvenile justice system during the day. With McCourt Policy in Practice, students are improving the lives of migrant workers in a shantytown community in Honduras and traveled there recently to tackle the community's trash problem. And throughout the past year, McCourt students could be found all over the city of Washington mentoring underprivileged students and helping feed and clothe homeless families.

I know public service is in your DNA. People with your training, your values, and your talents do not fall into line. They chart their own course. They take the unbeaten path. They follow their inner compass. I know this will be true for you.

The truth is, as fragile and fractured as political discourse sometimes seems, we are bound together by the same enduring beliefs.

We believe our economy should reward success. We believe our private sector should give an entrepreneur a shot at starting the next ground-breaking business. We believe our job market should give a laid-off worker another chance to get hired and put food on the table. We believe our housing sector should give families the opportunity to get a mortgage and stay in their homes. We believe our research institutions should get the support they need so a scientist can find the cure to cancer. We believe our education system should place the most talented teachers in the classroom and make it possible for all students to reach their full potential. We believe our world should be safe from a warming climate, and the global community should put a stop to atrocities, brutality, and dire poverty. And we believe our government should be a practical one that does good things, defends those unable to defend themselves, and protects our nation that we hold dear.

You leave Georgetown at a moment when our country faces a number of important public policy challenges. How do we provide an ongoing safety net for the poorest and elderly? How do we design our economic policy in a way that promotes growth and shared prosperity? How can we move forward, in spite of our differences, and in favor of our shared principles as Americans?

You will be called on to help answer these and many other questions. I hope you not only bring the analytical skills you developed in your studies, but also the ability to work with those who hold different views to fashion honorable compromises that will move our country forward.

Before I close, let me say how grateful I am to be here to celebrate with the first class to commence forward as graduates of the McCourt School of Public Policy. And that being first -- having the courage to stand out and do something that has never been done before -- is part of leadership, too.

Thank you -- and congratulations.

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