Commencement Address

Education and Public Service

By

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Vice President Dayton-Johnson, deans, professors, provost, student award recipients, distinguished graduates, their families, and guests—

I am very pleased indeed to join you today for this Spring Commencement Ceremony. It is a privilege just to visit this beautiful city of Monterey, let alone to deliver a commencement address. And it is one of the greatest honours of my life to join you in receiving my own degree, an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters, for my work at the United Nations.

I am humbled to receive such recognition from one of this country's greatest liberal arts schools. Yet in granting this degree, you have done much more than honour an individual. You have underscored the importance of devoting a career to public service, to a cause wider than oneself: namely, the service of humanity. What a superb theme for a commencement address.

Many of you here today already know what you would like to do in your careers. Some of you will enter the public service, whether at the international, national, or local levels. Yet even those among you who wish to pursue careers in the private sector will still live in a world that is increasingly becoming a global community. This has been a sea change within one generation—when I was your age, it was still a novelty, even a rarity, to go and live in another country, let alone overseas. As fellow citizens of our common, troubled, and imperfect planet, we simply cannot isolate ourselves from the processes of growing international interdependence.

Whether we like it or not, we are all "world citizens" in one way or another. At the very least, we share our common humanity. We breathe the same air. We drink the same water. We use the same means of communication and transportation. We are vulnerable to acts of terrorism and recognize the horrible consequences of war. We confront diseases that do not stop at national borders. We understand the impact of foreign financial and economic developments on our national economy. We all face the consequences of climate change. And we ignore injustice and chronic economic inequalities only at our own common peril, and our mutual disgrace.

Yet although the various foundations of a future global community are forming even as I speak, many of our political, economic and social institutions remain echoes from a different era—an era characterized by the competitive pursuit of the interests of particular nation states, an era of winners and losers, an era in which material gain has a higher priority than the sanctity of moral norms, and an era best described by its familiar motto, "might makes right".

The United Nations itself mirrors many of these contradictions. Only states can join the UN and the sovereign equality of states is a fundamental principle of the UN Charter. Five particular states on the Security Council even have legal authority to veto initiatives that they do not believe would serve their national interests. Yet the Charter also contains language testifying to the early emergence of a truly global community. Its very first words refer to "we the peoples of the United Nations". Its Preamble identifies the goal of saving "succeeding generations from the scourge of war". It reaffirms our common "faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small". It seeks to build respect for the rule of law. It aims to promote "social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom".

Other fundamental norms of the Charter concern the prohibition on the threat or use of force, the duty to resolve disputes exclusively by peaceful means, and the goal of strengthening international peace and security "with the least diversion for armaments of the world's human and economic resources". None of these norms or goals apply to any specific country, but to all humanity. And the fact that these norms are not always reflected in the behaviour of states is in no way evidence of some flaw in the norm.

As former Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld once said, "set-backs in efforts to implement an ideal do not prove that the ideal is wrong."[1]

I believe that the incongruity in the Charter between expansive global norms and the powers and authorities of individual states can be overcome. While I do not think that this will require the end of the nation-state, I do believe it will require the rehabilitation of the *ends* of the nation-state. And when the strengths and limitations of all other means of achieving this goal are examined, surely none will emerge as more important than education. After all, a state is little more than an expedient device run by human beings serving as decision makers, as voters, as administrators, and as taxpayers.

What better way than education is there to set in place the tools needed to break down the contradictions between solemn international commitments and the actions and institutions of individual states? In field after field—and certainly this is true in the field of nuclear disarmament—we see a mismatch between lofty global norms and parochial national actions that are inconsistent with those norms. The legal commitment to undertake negotiations in good faith on nuclear disarmament, found in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, is a classic example of this. There is on the one hand a commitment to negotiate, yet on the other hand there is persistent refusal of nuclear-weapon States to undertake such negotiations or even to discuss the notion of a nuclear weapons convention. Among such states, you will not find a single nuclear disarmament agency, or any timetable, any plan or any budget for achieving nuclear disarmament.

In this context, I am enormously impressed that the Middlebury Institute has an entire Center—under the capable leadership of Professor Bill Potter—devoted to disarmament and non-proliferation not just as research subjects, but as *professions*.

Of course, nuclear disarmament is but one example of the work that remains ahead in bridging the many gaps between global norms and national implementation. Needless to say, you, today's honoured graduates, will surely encounter at some point opportunities to contribute all you can to doing exactly that: to bridge these gaps, to harmonize the relationship between international norms and domestic laws, policies, and institutions.

I think HG Wells got it right when he wrote early in the last century, that "Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe".[2] These contradictions become even more dangerous in our own century, one that has been plagued by terrorism, intra-state wars, violent religious extremism, arms races, gross injustice and growing economic inequalities, and military spending that is just out of control. Where are we to look to address

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[1] Dag Hammarskjöld, 15th Anniversary Dinner of the American Jewish Committee, 10 April 1957.
[2] HG Wells, The Outline of History (1921), p. 1100.

such challenges at the state and global level that does not involve the hard work of human beings like you?

Academia is intended to do far more than endow an individual with the means of self-sufficiency. It seeks to deepen the individual's understanding of the realities around us and to inform the individual of the wide variety of opportunities available to confront and resolve longstanding challenges facing our communities, our country and international society.

At the turn of this century, former Secretary-General Kofi Annan spoke about what he called the role of the "academy" in advancing the goal of nuclear disarmament.[3] He identified three specific roles. First, the academy advances the accumulation of knowledge through "discovery". There is much that is not known about the many complex political, social, economic, and technological challenges we face in globalization. The vital need for research focused on deepening our common understanding of these issues goes without question. Academia is often the birthplace of vision and an incubator of curiosity—both essential qualities in navigating our way through the difficult times of history present and history yet to come.

The second great function of the academy is in training a new generation to make their own contributions in meeting these challenges, a function that Annan called "education". This means teaching students specific practical skills they can use in the careers they choose to pursue. This is exactly what the Middlebury Institute of International Studies has been doing throughout its existence. Its policy orientation has kept its academic feet on the ground, which has enabled its graduates to enter both public service and the private sector prepared for the types of real-world challenges they will encounter in their careers.

The Institute has also long emphasized the importance of learning foreign languages, another indispensable skill needed for confronting the many challenges of globalization. Over the course of my own career, I of course began with German as my mother tongue. Along the way, I learned English, Dutch, French, and Spanish. I also studied Russian, Chinese, Bahasa Indonesia, and Thai. Believe me, I deeply respect an Institute that is renowned for its foreign language training. Learning a language means not only learning words and phrases, but absorbing a new culture—a new way of looking at the world—and with it, an appreciation of the environment others live in.

Annan's third role for the academy related to "advocacy". You can be scientific in your pursuit of the truth. But you do not have to be neutral about the causes you choose to pursue in your lives and careers. Advocacy in the public interest might not always be the most lucrative path to pursue, but it is one that offers rich personal rewards stemming from the realization that each human being has his or her own potential contributions to make even in addressing challenges that are global in scale. You will see such opportunities arise probably sooner than you think, and my advice to you is, seize them! Seize them all: feel proud of even the smallest achievement, and build on them.

I have some other advice for you today. Persist in the pursuit of causes and principles you truly believe in. Never stop learning. Hone your oral and written communication skills. Be

[3] Secretary-General Kofi Annan, remarks at John Jay College, New York, 20 November 2000.

humble but also proud in what you are doing and standing for. Believe in yourself! And for the women here today, use your voices and your brains to help the world finally to overcome the dark ages of gender inequality.

Perhaps the best advice I could provide today for all of you comes from a 19th Century American educator, Horace Mann, who stated in a commencement address at Antioch College in 1859, "Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity."

In my long career at the UN, I know that I have left many global problems unresolved. But to me, just striving for a great global cause creates its own victories of sorts. It is a victory over apathy, ignorance, and parochialism. I hope that my remarks today will inspire you all to contemplate what your own contribution will be to making this a better world. If you do, I will regard that personally as another victory for public service, for which I am grateful beyond words.

Upon receiving her Nobel Peace Prize in 2004, Wangari Maathi—the first African woman to receive that award—offered the following advice to young people: "Those of us who have been privileged to receive education, skill, and experiences and even power must be role models for the next generation of leadership." So in that spirit, I urge you all to use your newly acquired skills for the advancement of causes that you believe are great. Be a role model for service in the public interest. More than you may know, the future is in your hands.