



To The Class of 1986

# Fair Winds and Following Seas

A Commencement Address  
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Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff

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*Whenever Admiral William J. Crowe Jr. speaks, the world listens. Indeed the nation's media was tuned in to his May 10 address to the 1986 graduates of the University of Oklahoma. But on this windy Saturday afternoon, Bill Crowe had not come home to the OU campus to make pronouncements as his country's highest ranking military officer. The Oklahoma City native, who preceded his Annapolis career with a tour of duty as president of the OU freshman class, was in town to congratulate his fellow Sooners, to counsel them on dedication, optimism, open-mindedness and the ability to laugh at themselves.*

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**A**s a fellow Oklahoman who has a long association with this University, it is an understatement to say that I am thrilled to be with you today in this exciting setting and to share the sense of enthusiasm, anticipation and freedom that attends all graduation ceremonies. I don't know of any ceremony in our country that more graphically displays and demonstrates what our country is all about.

Commencement addresses fade rapidly—perhaps in a matter of seconds—but what will not be forgotten about today is that the Class of 1986 has successfully completed a hard, long and challenging curriculum and is graduating. You have cleared all the hurdles, slain all the dragons, knocked aside all the windmills which four years ago stood between you and a diploma. Today we are rightfully celebrating that achievement. On behalf of all the guests and parents and friends assembled, I salute you and extend our warmest wishes.

Speaking of parents, I strongly believe that they likewise should be accorded special recognition today. I am confident that the graduates would be happy to divide their glory with you. After all, you have made a substantial contribution to the whole process—including money, comfort, encouragement and probably a respectable share of nagging and prodding.

At the same time, if my own experience is any guide, you have not only paid a financial but a physical, mental and psychological price. In the name of the students, I would like to thank all of the parents.

One further aside. If you as parents have found the road to this day unduly taxing, you might profit from a bit of advice I saw on a bumper sticker a few months ago. It said: "Avenge yourself.

Live long enough to be a problem to your children."

In a more serious vein, I must confess to a certain amount of apprehension, because drafting a commencement address is a tough proposition. First of all, you know your audience has other things on its mind than listening to one more lecture. Second, the speaker is never given a topic, but at the same time is expected to inspire and to encourage his listeners with stirring remarks about nothing in particular.

That my guidance for today was vague did not come as a surprise. I learned early in my school career that academicians have a strong tendency to speak in generalities, and when you most want specific answers, to leave you on your own.

As a young and struggling student right here in Oklahoma, I had a number of teachers insist that a man becomes what he thinks about. This, of course, was designed to encourage studiousness and high thoughts. I accepted it for a while, but as I matured I discovered it was misleading advice. If it were true that a man becomes what he thinks about, by the time I was 18, I would have been a girl.

In any event, lacking a subject or definitive instructions, I turned to my own experience for help, as all commencement speakers do. As I contemplated the 43 years since I walked this campus, and the 40 years since I graduated from the Naval Academy—since I faced the world as you do now, with a degree but with little work experience, with high hopes but little actual know-how—a few special guideposts seemed to spring out.

They are not specific directions but pieces of general advice, which in retrospect seemed to apply to all lines of work and which have made it easier

for me to adjust to pressure, to change, to disappointment and also to good fortune. Don't misunderstand. I am not saying that I have always been able to successfully put these concepts into practice, but I would have been better off if I had.

In sum, they concern how we approach life, and for me, they emphasize the value of a truly educated, open and fair mind in today's complex world. I would like to share these thoughts with you for just the next few minutes.

There's a strong tendency today in this country—even among commencement speakers—to deplore the state of the world, to wring one's hands and to fantasize about the past—the good old days. My own experience suggests that these prophets of gloom overlook an awful lot that has gone on in the past and simply ignore the steady progress that has been made over the centuries.

This is not to say that we don't have global anxieties. You do not have to be told that our own society has strains and that we live under a number of clouds. I suspect that you have discussed these questions in many a classroom, seminar, forum and bull session during the past four years. Undoubtedly, it will take great energy, imagination and leadership to meet these challenges. But to conclude that because we have serious problems that we are going to the dogs is sheer nonsense.

The European of the 1400s who experienced the Black Plague, who didn't even know why his friends were dying, would not agree that we have not progressed. Neither would the Spanish seamen who sailed with the Armada, nor the Bedouin Arab who lived on the margins of starvation for centuries, nor those unfortunate peoples overrun by the Mongol con-

queror Tamerlane, nor Galileo, who would be ecstatic over the advances of modern science. These are only a few examples upon countless thousands.

In fact, previous ages have faced more disease, more poverty, more hunger, more corruption, more racism and more killing than your generation. The globe since its beginning has confronted terrifying challenges, and yet it is still revolving on its axis. In fact, it is more exciting and vibrant today than it has ever been.

It is sort of curious that older people often decry the state of affairs in addressing their offspring, but if given the opportunity, would exchange places with them without a minute of hesitation.

Art Buchwald put it this way: "I don't know whether this is the best of times or the worst of times, but I can assure you it's the only time we've got." No matter what you read in the newspapers or see on television, we are all going to make it. For 200 years this country has muddled through one crisis after another, and without changing our form of government.

Buchwald cites Watergate as the ultimate test. Two hundred million people were able to change presidents overnight without "one tank or helmeted soldier in the street" or "one bayonet being unsheathed." Any country that can do that can't be all bad.

The bottom line is that you should direct your energies to further improving our condition without being burdened with worrying about our decline and fall. With time you will discover that such an attitude not only better accords with the facts, but also will assist you in leading a more balanced and fruitful life.

Of course, it takes more than optimism to thread the rocks and shoals which block the way. In my experience, the greatest joy a human being can know is the joy that you celebrate today—the joy of accomplishment—the joy of completing a job well done. This joy can be boundless when we make full use of our minds, our talents, our time.

The average person in our country is paid for about 40 hours of productive time a week, although I have never heard of anyone making an outstanding success in a 40-hour week. Robert

Frost once said: "Work hard eight hours a day so you can be promoted. Then you work hard 12 hours a day."

In any event, the 40-hour week leaves the individual 128 hours a week to do with as he pleases. In essence, this means your society today offers you unparalleled opportunities to engage your abilities—in a profession, in a business, in volunteer work, in church participation, hobbies, community service, self education, etc.

But no matter where you choose to put the emphasis and to invest your effort, the important thing is to give it your best shot—not just occasionally, but all the time. There are no guarantees with your diploma. The degree may widen your opportunities, but future achievement, results, satisfaction depend on what you have yet to do. Believe me, in the long run you can never expect to receive more than you earn. This advice may not comfort you, but like the Law of Gravity, it's an inescapable fact.

An individual who does not continue to learn and grow as a person is no better than one who cannot. Newton D. Baker wisely pointed out that, "The man who graduates today and stops learning tomorrow is uneducated the day after." Think of your life as a piece of farmland. It can only return to you what you first give to it. Making full use of your abilities, your plot of ground will return to you and yours an abundance that will amaze and delight you.

I never use that analogy that I'm not reminded of the small town minister who was driving through the countryside. He came upon a particularly well-tended farm. It was green and productive and just generally impressive. He stopped and walked over to the fence and said to the farmer who obviously worked the land, "Brother, the Lord has seen fit to give you an awfully wonderful farm." The farmer thought about it a minute and said, "Well, I guess that's right, Pastor, but I wish you'd seen it when He gave it to me."

In fact, many of your rewards in life will be unexpected ones. People take notice of a job well done, and new opportunities often follow. In preparing these remarks, I read several graduation addresses. In practically every in-

stance, the speaker mentioned that his career on one or more occasions had taken a completely unforeseen turn, normally for the better. In most cases, this good fortune was not the result of clever manipulation or some master plan, but it opened up because the individual had drawn attention to himself by doing a good job—often a job that had little direct relation with the new offer.

At times the path will be difficult, boring, discouraging and certainly not well marked. But if you take each step as well as you can and keep on walking, you eventually will reach high ground. Abraham Lincoln once said, "When I was a young boy, I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life, but I prepared myself for the opportunity that I knew would come my way." I could not call a better witness to testify on behalf of doing a good job.

I will not even try to imagine the world you will see 20 years from now. It is changing even as I speak. But one thing I can say with certainty, it will demand minds and leaders of the greatest sensitivity, imagination and flexibility. The pace of change today is mind boggling. More technological progress will be made in the next 35 years than has been made in the last 50,000. In fact, over three-fourths of all the scientists and mathematicians who ever lived are still alive today. Every decade thousands of new products, concepts and technologies enter our economic life with their accompanying social problems.

For example, the personal computer threatens to disrupt my own lifestyle. Five years ago, I had never given a thought to whether computers would be "user friendly," to my Pac Man score or to my wife's recipe file. All of these things have suddenly taken on a new importance because an infernal machine called a "PC" is now in the house. Now I am having to learn a whole new way of thinking and talking so I can interact with my computer without hurting its feelings. At my age, that's not easy to do.

But it certainly does suggest to us why a great many of our problems stem from people predicting that past trends would continue or refusing to adapt to new circumstances. Witness the failures of our steel industry, au-

tomobile manufacturers and savings and loan institutions to adjust promptly to their competition.

Right now, as you complete four years of college education, I suspect that most of you approach the outside world with comparatively open minds, willing to entertain new ideas and many new points of view. In fact, you probably deplore what appears to be the narrow outlook and predictability of many of your elders. Mark Twain said, "You tell me where a man gets his corn pone, and I'll tell you what his opinions are."

He was right, of course. Bankers, military people, doctors, journalists, farmers, lawyers, stockbrokers, television executives, all develop their own stereotype view of the world, which often leaves little room for change or invention or appreciation for the opinion of others.

But don't forget, they were once just like you—new graduates, dozing through a commencement speech and determined to remain open minded. But it didn't work that way. They entered a certain industry or profession and were gradually entrapped in its patterns of thinking and doing.

Jane Bryant Quinn, a noted columnist, calls such people "prisoners of their vocabulary—the vocabulary of their work world." She goes on to point out that the greatest risk new graduates run is that when they enter industry or a profession, "their minds will pick up its ideas, then close and sink like a stone." In turn, their intellects soon "vanish without a trace." In other words, they become the "narrow-minded adults, whose existence they once failed to understand." She's dead right, and what she describes is more the norm than the exception.

I urge you to reject that path and to nourish the spirit of inquiry which the University of Oklahoma has planted. This ambition involves keeping a broad circle of acquaintances, wide reading, developing interests outside of your work, seriously listening to others, even your critics, and constantly seeking fresh points of view. Quinn says, "You should begin to worry when you start sounding like everyone else you know."

I personally witnessed a man wrestling with this problem a few months

ago in New York City. I was in a taxi and asked the driver who he was going to vote for in the next election. He said that his whole family—including his grandparents, parents, brothers and himself—had always voted for Party X. I surmised, therefore, that he would vote for Party X this time. He hesitated for a moment and said, "No, I think I'm going to vote for Party Y. There comes a time in every man's life when he's got to ignore his principles and do the right thing." I couldn't have put it better.

Your mind is something like a parachute. It won't help you if it won't open when you need it. But do not underestimate this task. Given the pressures and the specialization of the modern world, you will have to work continuously at keeping an open mind. But the rewards are great. This capacity is the foundation on which a man or woman can build genuine integrity and self-esteem. To be able to change your mind when the facts warrant doing so is the hallmark of an educated person. You could pay no greater tribute to this great university than winning the constant fight to maintain your intellectual freedom, independence and perspective.

I have just one more piece of amateur wisdom to offer. As you progress and mature, nothing will stand you in better stead than a sense of humor. In a perfect or ideal world, this would not be so important. We could be serious about every subject without harm. But unfortunately, life does not meet that criterion. There is no line of work, no endeavor, no institution, no achievement, no failure that doesn't have its ludicrous or ridiculous aspects. To recognize that simple lesson is a first step toward maturity.

Alan Alda, better known as Hawkeye of "M\*A\*S\*H" fame, expounding on his own philosophy, contends that "to be playful about the most serious things is a trait of the most dedicated person." It is a "mark of closeness and involvement, not antagonism." He may have been rationalizing his own rather irreverent attitude, but I do believe there is a great deal of truth in what he says.

I must emphasize that I do not just mean the ability to appreciate a joke or tell a good story. In my book, a man

who cannot make fun of himself does not have a sense of humor. The fringe benefits of being able to laugh at your own frailties, pomposity, pretense or mistakes are many. It is an essential part of remaining humble, relaxed and in touch with reality.

I watched Mr. George Burns on television a few years ago. He said that in his career he had tried singing—no one listened. He tried dancing—no one liked it. He tried comedy—no one laughed. He tried serious acting, and everybody laughed. By the time he discovered that he didn't have any talent, he was too big a star to quit. I cannot think of a better example of how laughter can have a positive impact on every man's life than George Burns, who at the age of 90 is still going strong and is still too big a star to quit.

In essence, a genuine sense of humor oils the gears of personal relationships. It lends perspective to complex problems, and above all, it helps keep you sane when the world closes in. And believe me, it will close in at times. I cannot imagine going through this world without lots of laughter.

In preparing for today, I tried desperately to recall my own graduation and what the speaker said. He was Mr. James Forrestal, the secretary of the Navy at that time. I have only one fleeting memory of his remarks. He counseled us to conduct ourselves, no matter what we did or where fortune called, so that we would always be welcome to return to our hometowns. It was good advice, and I suspect that Secretary Forrestal, if he were alive, would be thrilled that I could retain that story.

If you choose to remember anything about today, perhaps you could recall that the address was given by a career military officer who didn't talk about Congressional appropriations, that he was high on life and doing a good job, that he counseled open-mindedness and believed that people should laugh a great deal, particularly at themselves.

With that, I commend the keeping of this country's ideals and institutions into the hands of the Class of 1986. As we say in the Navy, may the Class of 1986 always have fair winds and following seas. 