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AN ADDRESS BY REP. GERALD R. FORD  
AT COMMENCEMENT EXERCISES OF WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY  
WINSTON-SALEM, N.C.  
MONDAY MORNING, MAY 29, 1972

President Scales, members of the faculty, members of the graduating class of 1972 and my friends, it is a distinct privilege and an honor for me to participate in your commencement ceremonies.

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As an example, he cited the words: "When I was your age." Whenever an older person utters these words to a younger person, [he said] the comprehension mechanism of the younger party simply goes blank like a television screen when somebody pulls the plug.

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So, I solemnly promise you that I will not once mention how it was "when I was your age" nor even express the wish that I might be again.



But I will mention one hope that I have for all of you when you are my age. I hope that you will have the heartwarming experience of watching your firstborn son receive his degree from a fine educational institution like Wake Forest.

You can be doubly proud of this moment because you, all of the graduating class, more than anyone else, know that Wake Forest is one university that demands and achieves academic excellence.

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A commencement speech is when you take 5,000 words and string them out for 45 minutes, and all you really say is: SCHOOL'S OUT!

Well, you know that Ford has a better idea -- and this Ford's better idea is to keep this as brief as possible. I've found that the only one who listens to me after ten minutes is the next speaker.

In a few weeks I will be visiting the People's Republic of China. Following the President's historic trip to that vast and ancient country, the Majority and Minority Leaders of the Congress were invited by the Chinese. Senators Mansfield and Scott recently returned, while Congressman Hale Boggs of Louisiana and I, with our wives and a small American staff, will be leaving in June.

I wish that I could have been to Peking and back already so I could give you a firsthand report; but like most of you, I have been doing a lot of homework and midnight reading lately to prepare myself.

I've been briefed by the President and the Senators, as well as China experts from the State Department, on what to expect of the new China which has been hidden from Americans, indeed from most foreigners, for a full generation.

The one impression they all bring back is the tremendous degree of dedication and discipline which they encountered among the Chinese people. They are struck by the fact that farmer and city dweller, young and old, one and all appear to be motivated by the common goals set for them by Chairman Mao, by the nearly universal desire to reform their society through their own resources and their own hard work.

President Nixon told me when he returned from China that the one thing which impressed him most was their total belief and total dedication to their system of government, especially among the younger people. But he added that he returned with a stronger faith in our system of government, with its unique emphasis on individuality and freedom. Both the Democratic and Republican leaders of the Senate voiced similar sentiments after their visit to the People's Republic of China.

Of course I do not intend to prejudge China; I go there with great gratitude for the opportunity, with an open mind and immense curiosity, and I will draw my own conclusions. But I mention these impressions of those who have gone before because I believe that in every human society,

East or West, ancient or modern, from the earliest records of organized communities until the present day, there has been a continuous effort to find the perfect mix of these two ideals; on the one hand, discipline and dedication; and on the other, individuality and freedom.

I do not say that one is better than the other; what I do say is that we must find a proper proportion of both; in government, and in our individual lives. Whenever a society goes too far in one direction or the other it is in trouble. Where there is too much discipline and dedication, you get despotism, and even a benevolent despotism will eventually corrupt and corrode the human spirit and sow the seeds of its own destruction. Where there is too much individuality and freedom, on the other hand, there will be disorder and anarchy and chaos, in which no one can live in safety, let alone create for the common good. From such chaos there always arises a strong man, a self-appointed Master, who restores dedication and discipline and destroys every vestige of individuality and freedom.

You have seen the clash of these two fundamental forces in your own lives. Your elders -- be they parents or teachers or preachers or political leaders -- have come down hard on the side of dedication and discipline.



It is no accident that the several fields of academic inquiry, the law, medicine, physical science, literature, language, engineering, theology and philosophy, for example, are called "disciplines." To master any of them requires an extraordinary degree of self-discipline and of dedication to a chosen goal. This definitely limits individuality and curtails individual freedom, at least during the learning period. But we accept it if our motivation is strong enough; and we also have full confidence that after our apprenticeship we will enjoy an extra measure of freedom and individual expression.

Now you have reached the first and major milestone of academic discipline, and you are about to reap the reward of greater freedom and individualism. The thought I hope to leave with you today is not to swing too far toward either extreme. I urge you to keep in your own lives, and in the life of our nation, the delicate balance between discipline and freedom, between dedication and individuality, without which you cannot possibly have either a happy life or a good society.

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freedom and individuality and the Spartans had dedication and discipline; the Spartans were emulated by the Macedonians and under the leadership of Alexander they subdued not only Athens but the known world. Yet their triumph was short, freedom and individuality would not be suffocated, and the world was not again ordered by discipline and dedication until the Romans forged these twin virtues into their iron swords. The Roman world was long on law and order and short on creativity, which burst out anew in the near-anarchy of the Renaissance.

I'm not a history professor, but you can follow my theme through the rest of it. There has always been this struggle and conflict between absolute liberty and absolute order, and it has been the job of politicians and statesmen throughout history to reconcile these two most desirable conditions of human life.

It has been said that the difference between politicians and statesmen is that the politician thinks of the next election, while the statesman thinks of the next generation.

I don't know where that puts me because, frankly, I think of both.

Like the soap commercial says: Don't you wish everybody did?



I'm here this morning not as a statesman, nor as a politician, nor even as a parent. I'm here because I am concerned, as I think you are concerned, with what kind of a country and what kind of a world we will have when you are my age, when you have done the best you can to make it better, when you can think of all the things you should have done and didn't do, and all the things you did and shouldn't have done, and when, perhaps, you will be called upon to say a few words of wisdom to the Senior Class of Two Thousand and Two.

The thoughts I hope to leave are these: Nurture in your own lives, and sustain in this Nation, the delicate and difficult mixture of discipline and dedication, of individuality and freedom, which has got us where we are today, and will preserve and protect us in the future.

Americans have not yet found the perfect formula. But we have done better than most of the nations that have come and gone in history; we live under a system of government that is nearly 200 years old and is today the oldest continuous Constitutional republic in the world. But it is changing, it has always been changing, and it will continue to change.

Just for instance, in this very Congress we have lowered the voting age to 18 and proposed a Constitutional Amendment for equal rights for women, though the States have yet to go along. The voting age was set at 21 many centuries ago when this was the age at which a young male was supposed to be strong enough to wear heavy armor. The inequality of women under the law -- for I assure you they have always been superior in most other respects -- stems from the same medieval times when muscle rather than mental ability was society's primary asset.

When you are my age the Class of 2002 may very likely be admonished by a woman politician. I am delighted to note that Wake Forest has again set the pace by electing Marylou Cooper as next year's Student Government President. My opponent in my last election was a woman, but unfortunately she didn't get enough votes. My congratulations to Miss Cooper. I trust she isn't planning to move to Michigan.

I am encouraged to learn that 62 percent of the eligible students at Wake Forest have already registered to vote in November. I hope that percentage will increase. I was in the forefront of the effort in Congress to extend the vote to 18, 19 and 20 year-old Americans, not because I



felt it would benefit my party -- most of the surveys suggested the contrary -- but because I sincerely believe it will benefit our country.

Don't get me wrong -- I'm not going soft and saying that your generation knows better than my generation how the government should be run, or that you have all the answers that we have failed to find. But I have four of the younger generation in my own family, and I meet with groups of young people four and five times a week, and I never come out of such discussions without some interesting new ideas or approaches to problems. So I'm confident that giving the thoughtful young people of America a voice and a vote can only benefit all of us in the long run. My only misgiving is that you will not take full advantage of this chance to get into the hot-and-heavy, give-and-take of the political process, not only by voting but also in precinct work and year-round party building and policy-formulation, not only by championing the candidate of your choice in a glamorous Presidential contest but also by working for and supporting the champions of good government who run for school boards, county and city office, the State legislatures and the Congress. Even running for some partisan political office yourself.

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