

Remarks by Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff to the Fairleigh Dickinson University

Release Date: May 22, 2008

East Rutherford, NJ

Secretary Chertoff: President Adams, Mary Kay, members of the Board of Trustees, thank you very much for awarding me this doctorate. To the students, and perhaps even more so to the parents, I congratulate you on reaching this very important milestone in your life. Congratulations.

It's a pleasure to join you here on the floor of what is now called the Izod Center on this wonderful occasion. Of course, I go back far enough to be able to remember when this was Brendan Byrne which goes to show you how much things change over time.

For all of you this is probably not the first commencement or graduation ceremony. You have all graduated from high school. Some of you went through graduation ceremonies when you left eighth grade and many of you will continue to future commencements or graduations as you proceed to receive professional degrees, or pursue other kinds of graduate studies.

In some ways you go through life, it'll seem as if you have a series of milestones or commencements; when you finish a job, when you get married, when you move to a different part of the country. It won't all be attending ceremonies as grand and as well populated as this, but they'll all be occasions for reflecting back on what has gone forth and for considering what lies ahead.

Well, I will say this: this is the commencement that finally and irrevocably launches you on the path to adulthood. There is no turning back. The period of preparation is over. Now it's kind of starting a new life. And so I thought what I would do is try to take a little bit of my own experience in a number of opportunities that I've had over my life to reflect and maybe give you my perspective on what you need to bring with you as you embark on this next stage of your adulthood.

First and foremost as you look back on what you've already achieved I think you have to remember that you've got to believe in yourselves. It's your ability to meet tomorrow's challenges with optimism and confidence that will give you the greatest set of tools that you can possibly have to go forward and meet your destiny.

Now as you go out in life you are going to meet pessimists, the Chicken Littles who will always tell you that the world is bad; that it's getting worse. They're going to warn you all about the tough circumstances and they're going to tell you to downsize your plans, alter your dreams, and live a life of diminished expectations.

Sometimes these people tell you that they're discouraging prognosis is really just realism. But I actually think it's not realism. I think it's fatalism. I think fatalism is shrugging your shoulders and not confronting the challenges. I think realism is continuing to keep your ideals in mind even as you recognize that life will present many challenges as you try to realize those dreams.

Now, of course, as the Secretary of Homeland Security I constantly face the need to be realistic without becoming fatalistic. The threats our country faces are real enough and as George Martin illustrated with his effort to raise funds on behalf of the first responders of September 11th, we can never forget what this country has been through and we've got to continue to dedicate ourselves to assure to the extent that's humanly possible it never happens again.

But the fact that these threats are real does not mean we have to be fatalistic or resign to the fact that they're going to happen again.. In fact, because we've gone seven years without a September 11th attack we can afford to be realistic and optimistic at the same time. It doesn't mean that we become complacent. It doesn't mean we shut down our efforts. It doesn't mean that we lurch between the (inaudible). But what it means is we continue to move forward with a balanced and realistic view of what challenges we face in a very dangerous world, keeping a balance between our security, our liberty, and our way of life.

The next observation I guess I would make based on my experiences are to prioritize. I can guarantee you this: as you get older your life is going to get busier. It's going to get more complicated. There are going to be increasing demands on your time and you're going to have family who are also well deserving of your

attention.

That means you're going to have to work at setting priorities and recognizing you can't do everything at once, and you've got to figure out what the most important thing to do and what has to be done first.

Every day you're going to have to make decisions that reduce the clutter in your life; the things you've allowed to accumulate over time, sometimes without regards to your most important goals and values.

A third piece of advice, maybe one of the more important pieces of advice, be a good listener. Now of course we're all designed with two ears and one mouth and not the other way around. That should tell us something about the relevant priority of listening as opposed to talking.

In my job, in fact, in all of my jobs sometimes the most valuable lessons learned are those that are taken by listening to other people including people who disagree with you or people who criticize you. You may not always accept the observations or criticisms of those people, but it's always worth listening to what they have to say so you can test your assumptions and your own values.

If you train yourself to be a good listener you will go far in life, and that includes your personal life where you will make your loved ones feel much more appreciated if you (inaudible.)

But, you know, there is a time that you have to talk as well, and so my fourth bit of advice is when you are ready to speak, learn how to speak persuasively. Learn how to speak to convey values in simple common sense terms.

Now not all of us are blessed at birth with the ability to be great speakers. And some of the best speakers, and most notable speakers in history have been those who worked very hard to overcome handicaps in this regard.

Winston Churchill, for example, is widely regarded as one of the greatest orators in history, but it didn't come naturally. When he was a young man he practiced each day in front of a mirror and he used to work laboriously to write his speeches out to memorize them so while it appeared he spoke off the cuff without any preparation, his speaking was actually the result of a great deal of labor.

When you do speak publicly my advice is very simple; be clear and direct and use plain, basic English and talk about analogies in terms that puts people in their own daily lives.

A fifth bit of advice is to work hard at being resilient, and by that I mean emotionally. And let me be pretty blunt. The farther you go in life, the more impact you make, the more you make decisions, the more you try to accomplish, the more likely it is that you're going to wind up stepping on someone's toes or having somebody who strongly disagrees with you, and you're going to finally get pummeled and you get criticized, and sometimes you can get attacked.

And in order to keep moving forward on the path to which you've dedicated yourself, and in order to keep moving forward to actually achieve and accomplish the things that you've worked for, you have to prepare yourself emotionally for the fact that you will be criticized and you will be pummeled. And sometimes you will have setbacks but it is only by having an emotional resilience to continue to move forward that you have any hope of accomplishment.

If you look back over some of the historical figures you've encountered in the course of your studies here and when you were in high school or even earlier, people like Lincoln, people like Franklin Delano Roosevelt, people like Winston Churchill, reflect on this, although in the light of history it looks like the decisions they had made were very straight-forward, very obvious, and clearly correct. When they actually lived in the events of the day making very difficult decisions, they often found themselves on the receiving end of an enormous amount of criticism.

Abraham Lincoln was mocked, criticized, widely despised at various points during the Civil War. There were riots in New York and Baltimore. In fact, there was some question that he couldn't even reach the inauguration without being assassinated. But because he had the emotional resilience to continue to pursue his dream of the union, he was able to persevere and this country is the better for it.

My final bit of advice is this: that whatever you choose to do, you invest your lives in something that is bigger and greater than yourselves and your daily concerns. Some people do this by dedicating themselves to public service, and I know for example that I'm privileged to lead an organization with 208,000 public servants who

do everything from guard our borders to make life more secure at our chemical plants and our airlines, to manning cutters up in the Arctic and in the Caribbean in order to protect our maritime domain. But all of them have in common the public service at the very top of the list (inaudible).

But even if you decide you want to pursue private interests I strongly recommend you consider volunteer work in your community, whether it's through Citizen Corps or any one of the number of auxiliaries or voluntary organizations. Whether it's assisting firefighters or first responders or children or people in need, your ability to (inaudible) community and to the public is going to be enriching and is going to make whatever you do seem more balanced and more rewarding.

So that's my advice to you as you pass this stage of commencement to the next stage of commencement. May you do all great things with the time that you have. May you remember that the time that you have is limited and none of us knows what the limit of our time is; and may you be a blessing to yourselves and to your loved ones in the next generation.

Congratulations and God bless you.

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This page was last reviewed/modified on May 22, 2008.