

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Commencement Address

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Thank you so much for that nice introduction, Chancellor Herman . . . my mother would be proud.

Hello, graduates, family, friends and faculty of the University of Illinois. Thank you for honoring me, and thank you for the opportunity to share this important day with you.

And I'd like to give a warm, "Hello" to President Jose White. It's because of him that I'm here today and it's because of his leadership that the University of Illinois' standing has never been higher. We are fortunate to have him and I am doubly fortunate to count him as a friend.

I am a guy who has never forgotten that I was born and raised in a railroad boxcar. And because of that, I routinely celebrate my life's many good fortunes.

To get ready for today I actually sat down at my computer – using Google and You-Tube – and researched Commencement addresses.

First, I discovered that the longer the speaker's resume and the worse the weather, the longer the Commencement address. Rain was generally good for at least 30 minutes . . . a double PhD within blazing sun and heat could add an hour, easy. Fortunately, of all of us, given today's temperature and my humble background; unless I get really carried away; we could be out of here in 10-15 minutes.

Second, I learned from my Google research that the best way to make a good impression as a Commencement speaker is to focus on a few topics that you are comfortable with and – above all – be brief because this is your very special day; and a time to celebrate with your friends and family.

The Winning Way is the working title of my remarks today. These remarks boiled down to just four very simple words: Faith . . . Opportunities . . . Challenges . . . and Confidence.

Faith is necessary for hope; for ambition; for progress and a belief in the future. Without faith, how does one ever believe things can be better? Without faith, there simply is no basis for hope. Without faith that you can better yourselves, your circumstances, your community, there is no purpose to life. Without faith that our best days are ahead of us, there can be no progress toward better days.

Our elders built this county on faith. And, despite all of the things that have changed since I sat in your seat, one constant has been a belief that each generation can improve itself.

Attending college, by the way, was an act of faith on your part, and – perhaps most of all – on the part of your parents who must have believed that four years of tuition would be time and money well spent.

Many years ago I sat where you are today; and listened to a speaker who spoke of an America which had the means to solve the world’s most complex social and global problems. I remember those remarks as being both profound and beautifully entertaining, but the America described that day was not the country I knew and had grown up in. My view was that somehow I would have to figure out a way to survive, regardless of the many obstacles my America would put in front of me.

The America I knew in 1960 had been in and out of war for nearly 20 years; and was a country that had tolerated slavery and – in my opinion – far too much human suffering. It was the country, where it was still legal in many communities to discriminate against a person because of gender and the color of one’s skin. It was a country where some used every means at their disposal to keep “my kind” in our place . . . including lynching.

Some of you may have studied the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision that ended the practice of “separate but equal” educational opportunities for blacks and whites. You may also have read about the integration of Little Rock Central High in 1957, and the crisis that occurred because of the *Brown* decision. To me, that’s not ancient history; because that was the America I grew up in. I was just 18 years old when the *Brown* decision was handed down and starting my sophomore year when the Little Rock school system finally desegregated. Now, fast-forward to two years after I graduated; and on national TV, the newly-elected Governor of Alabama was proclaiming in his inaugural address, “Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.”

In a self-proclaimed “nation of laws,” this face of America was – to me – both hypocritical and disturbing. Two years later, in 1964, I traveled to Birmingham as a member of the Harlem Globetrotters; and the team played two games, one before a white audience and a second for a black audience. To many of us, this was just another exclamation point to emphasize that the America we lived in had no intention of ever becoming an “inclusive” society!

Where else could any of us turn in those times; but to faith? Faith in our Constitution, in this nation’s Bill of Rights; faith in the good intention of our public policy leaders and in the fundamental goodness of our neighbors . . . black and white.

It was faith that helped me overcome those terrible legacies and prejudices. Faith that America was – in fact – the greatest country on earth. Faith that we could vote for the right leaders and faith that there were leaders in Washington “cut from the same cloth” as our President Joe White who would stand up and address public policy errors. In President White’s popular book, *The Nature of Leadership*, he says, “Leaders should take special care to extend dignity and respect to all people.” Just those simple words, if they had been spoken by an elected American leader during the days of my youth, might have saved hundreds of innocent lives, and billions of precious tax dollars.

It was years later, while sitting in a South African conference on human rights, that I realized that while America was far from being perfect, we the people – and how beautiful those three words are – we the people in this great country have retained the faith that we can be better and move closer to the ideals we espouse.

If faith is an important point on your personal compass, let it be the northern one because you’ll use it to steer your way along some unclear paths.

Just as surely, then, “Opportunity” must lie to the west. Not literally, of course, but in a figurative sense; the “west” in America has always represented our frontier and – with it – opportunity. America remains a land of opportunity and I sincerely believe this today as I did in the 60’s.

Exciting opportunities are all around you. There has never been a more fluid, opportunity-laden time in world history than now . . . and there has never been a generation better prepared than yours. Think about it . . . do you want to start a business? The barriers to starting businesses have never been lower. Do you want to live in or study a certain culture or country? More borders are open now than at any time in modern history. In today’s world there are borders, fences and walls,

but – for the most part – they are lower than ever. And, because of the technology that your generation understands and uses so well, it is possible for you to live where you choose and work where you want, and to easily know things that were just plain old mysteries to my generations.

Class of 1008, believe me when I say – opportunities are shouting out loud to get our attention.

A fair number of you may not know what you'll be doing tomorrow and a few of you I suspect may be moving back home with your parents.

Whatever your first steps in the journey, just deal with it . . . there's plenty of time. Demand side economies always rebound, so get in position today to score tomorrow.

“Opportunity,” is not synonymous with “entitlement” and I hope it never is. Opportunities that come too easy rarely have great value. To the contrary, opportunity is often just an admission ticket to the unknown and very often to the hardest work you'll ever do in your life. You can be comforted in knowing that I believe that you are ready; and that the University of Illinois has prepared you in ways you may only appreciate years from now.

That said, America is the easiest place I know to find opportunity. Those opportunities won't necessarily look like those grabbed by your parents in the 70's and 80's, but they are there and they are plentiful. In times like this, I often wish I had another 30 years in my career but I leave these challenges to you, to my son and me two daughters.

As one example, the United States dominates the field of biotechnology, a field that promises to change our global frame of reference. The revenues the U.S. earns today from biotech are about five times as much as all of Europe and represent about three-quarters of all biotech revenues globally.

Now, I mention this not because everyone here is graduating with degrees in Chemistry, Physics or Engineering. My hope is that everyone here understands how this single field is changing our world.

I encourage you not to shy away from challenges or artificial barriers. I graduated with a non-technical degree and no formal business training and went on to become president of a technical division of a highly-acclaimed Fortune 500 technology company. From the University of Illinois I started maturing as a

confident leader and I learned how to learn; how to compete, and how to apply myself. I encourage you to take this experience and my example and build on it.

I see strong parallels today to my era. Like you, we were on the verge of great challenges back then. We know change can be difficult and frequently unpleasant; and often comes at great cost. But change can also bring positive by-products that create opportunity; change can help level the playing field or even help you by causing society to re-write old rules to fit a new generation's reality.

Take globalization, for example. Many people see global markets and global marketing as negatives, and even challenges our way of life. Yes, jobs have in fact been shipped overseas to low-cost economies but at the same time millions of new jobs have been created here in the U.S. Think about this: has the I-Pod been a windfall for California-based Apple Computer or for the firms in China that manufacture it?

The answer – I think – is both. Millions of consumers now use I-Pods and hundreds of thousands of people sell them or develop software for the I-Tunes platform. What about the musicians whose careers got jumpstarted from exposure through digital music distribution; and what about the designers, developers, and manufacturers who are competing for market share in an industry that didn't exist just five years ago? Is this challenge . . . or an opportunity?

Another example . . . globalization – and a global workforce means there will be a premium placed on the ability to work with and lead teams from widely diverse cultures and backgrounds. Who is better equipped to thrive in such a world than you, because you have learned to live peaceably in one of the most diverse societies in the world? If you want more proof of our diversity, consider for a second that this year's presidential election has not been dominated by a collection of white, Protestant males; but by a woman, a black man, a Mormon, a Hispanic and an Italian-American.

I wanted to briefly say something in this speech about the very critical election that will take place this fall. When I was working on this section of my remarks, I e-mailed a close friend of mine – who happens to be a lawyer and one of the nation's best and most dedicated social and political activists – and asked for his views . . . three days later I got his reply:

“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter. Social justice matters. Economic justice matters. Children matter. You and I matter. Because we matter we must never remain silent when we see a loss of hope. No

one ever really knows when they are making history. Rosa Parks made history. Four students from Greenville made history by confronting an evil system. Abraham Lincoln made history by setting this nation on a new course. In November, it'll be your turn to make history.”

Those words were in a signed letter from “Martin Luther King Jr.”

Now, how is that for timeliness? I also think those comments are very relevant to your generation and truly heavy stuff.

I believe we will all make history this November and that this entire election process has already been historic. In fact, regardless of who ends up with the most electoral votes, our country has already won.

Think about it for a minute: just twenty years ago, the image of a black man and a white woman together on a television screen – in any context – was considered provocative and upsetting to many. To go from that worldview to today – when a black man and a white woman sit side by side contesting for their party’s presidential nomination – is remarkable and proof to me that from great challenges great opportunities always seem to arise.

But – for all the amazing things this nation has done and is capable of – we can never forget that we have, in fact, experienced some terrible failings. In 2005, we failed the residents of New Orleans in their time of greatest need and in the years since 2001 we have failed at times to honor the principles we hold most dear because of fear. And surely we will fail again; but great nations, great organizations, and great people build from failings and will only allow themselves to become stronger. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “Our greatest glory is not in never failing, but in rising up every time we fail.”

So, recognize the opportunity within each challenge and seize it. There’s one heading left on the compass – south – and one more word I want to talk about: “Confidence.” Confidence is the base that makes everything possible.

“Where does confidence come from,” you might ask. And did Michael Jordan have ego, arrogance or just raw talent?

Confidence is a product of vision, of planning and – as Michael Jordan himself will tell you – flat-out hard work.

All great athletes and business leaders I've ever known have discovered this little secret of an obsession with hard work and preparation.

For the last fifteen years, much of my professional goal-setting has been involved with the Harlem Globetrotters . . . an authentic global icon . . . I've been fortunate to work with the Globetrotters twice – first as a player and later as chairman and owner.

When I purchased the team, the company had fallen on hard times. Many people thought I'd taken on an impossible situation. The overriding goals were to revitalize this wonderful brand to achieve attractive financial returns; but also I wanted to stake out a leadership position in caring and giving by creating a billion-dollar war chest that would be used to help better the lives of children around the world. That was our obsession and what drove our work and the overriding preparation every day to be the very best.

Class of 2008:

I hope for you – a life of faith and confidence – of opportunities and – yes – challenge. I also hope that you are leaving this remarkable institution with a belief that the world and its challenges and changes are manageable. You are blessed to live in a free and open society on a planet that is hurling through this beautiful universe at an incredible speed. You have no control over the speed or the destination. Find something and someone you can become passionate about and enjoy the journey. Your trip is off to a good start. Embrace your confidence and your faith and seek the new challenges and opportunities now afforded you as a 2008 University of Illinois graduate.

Thank you for inviting me to your locker room, your board room and to your special day. I close by congratulating you and wishing you all good luck . . .