

U. of Michigan Commencement

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

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REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY
IN COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS TO
THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you, President Duderstadt and thank you, regents, other honorary degree recipients, faculty, alumni, family members and citizens who are gathered here. But most of all, thank you to the graduates of the class of 1993 for letting me be part of this celebration. (Applause.)

It is a real pleasure for me to be here on a glorious Saturday afternoon that does remind us of football Saturdays, in which the celebration is not in terms of downs or yardage, but in terms of accomplishments and achievements of each of you. This is a university steeped in tradition, whose reputation for excellence goes far beyond the borders of this state.

Having grown up in the Midwest myself, I have always thought of Michigan as one of those institutions whose commitment to academic excellence and to public service certainly made it stand out above so many others. And of course, also being from the Midwest, I always thought of Harvard as the Michigan of the East. (Applause.)

Excellence is not just a word, it is a benchmark. And it represents what you have achieved. Because for those of you who are graduating, you are still in a minority of young Americans, most of whom do not go on to college or, even if they do, do not graduate from a four-year institution. So your excellence is not only about you, but it is about your generation and your country.

And when I talk about excellence, let me just expand for a moment about what I mean. To me, excellence is not found in any single moment in our lives. It is not about those who shine always in the sun, or those who fail to succeed in the darkness of human error or mistake. It is not about who is up or down today or this week. It is about who we are, what we believe in, what we do with every day of our lives. And for me, it is always telling when I think about excellence as to how someone deals with adversity and challenge. And I really believe, standing here in this great university, that the Fabulous Five are excellent and Chris Weber

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deserves the kind of thanks that we can give him for going on and going forward. (Applause.)

When life, as a friend of mine has often said, hits you in the jaw and knocks you down, the real challenge is whether you get up and how you feel about yourself from that time forward. That's not only true in the lives of individuals, it's true also of institutions and even of countries.

I graduated from college 24 years ago, before MTV or rap or CDs or cellular phones. Back then if you had said 10,000 Maniacs, you probably would have been talking about Haight-Ashbury in San Francisco.

The '60s were a time of momentous change in our country, but also a time of dislocation; a time of activism and optimism flowing from the civil rights movement, the Peace Corps, the space program. But our ambitions for a better world were also scarred by deep societal wounds, President Kennedy's assassination, the murders of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, the divisions of the Vietnam era, and the combustible mix of racism and poverty that exploded in so many of our cities.

When I graduated in 1969, I, like many of you, had dreams for my own life, but also for the world into which I was going. In a commencement speech, I talked about that. And going back and reading it now, I see the idealism, I see the excitement, and I know that at 21, I was perhaps unable to appreciate the political and social restraints that one faces in the world. But I am glad I felt like that when I was 21, and I have always tried to keep those feelings with me. I want to be idealistic. I want to care about the world. I want to be connected to other people. And I hope that you will as well. (Applause.)

The world has changed a lot in the intervening years. As one of the student speakers has already said, the Cold War is over. We are grateful for the opportunity to reach across in friendship to a former enemy like Russia. We have achieved greater rights for minorities and women. We remain the most powerful nation on Earth.

And yet we, too, have our challenges. We, too, must face the new problems that afflict our country. We see still too much inequality. We see too many people working too hard, but not getting ahead any longer. We see too few of our people being able to take advantage of the changes that this new world represents, because they are not prepared. They don't have the educational background, they are not given the kind of stability and structure within their families that enables them to understand how to deal in this new

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world. We see, too, a society that is often coming apart instead of coming together. But that is the world as it is. And we can bemoan it, or we can be challenged by it to change.

Certainly we face obstacles. Even though we do celebrate the end of the Cold War, we have new problems. Places with names like Bosnia and Somalia that I never heard of when I graduated from college are now on the front pages of our newspapers. We worry about nuclear proliferation, ethnic hatred, starvation, political instability, and terrorism. And at home, we watch our cities crumbling under the dual assault of drugs and guns that create a level of violence that is unacceptable. It is not any longer possible for us to postpone confronting what we are doing to our children in these cities where they cannot even leave their homes in safety to walk to school. (Applause.)

We need to take a collective, deep breath and decide how we will proceed in this moment of history to deal with the challenges we face. And you each will have a role in that. You each, either by effort and planning, will shape a life and make a contribution, or by an abdication of responsibility for your life, you will have your life shaped for you. Like generations of Americans before you, you will look for the right balance in your lives -- a balance of work, family, and service; a balance between your rights as individuals and your responsibilities to your families, your communities, and your country.

Perhaps your experience here at Michigan will help serve as a guide, because here you have met people from diverse backgrounds; you've had your ideas and beliefs tested; you've had to learn what you are willing to stand for and stand against.

Universities are incubators of ideas and havens for free speech and free thought. And I hope that each of you has taken advantage of that because we will need your best thinking as we struggle to find that proper balance between rights and responsibilities. Regrettably that balance has been thrown out of kilter over the last years. Throughout the 1980s we heard too much about individual gain, about the ethos of selfishness and greed. We did not hear enough about what it meant to be a member of a community; to define the common good; to repair the social contract.

An exaggerated emphasis on "me" as opposed to "we" has accentuated the gaps between us and has resulted in the problems that I have referred to. And so what we now have an opportunity to do is work to right that balance again, to develop shared goals and to be part of reaching them. It does not mean sacrificing individual rights. It does not mean stifling the spirit of any of us. But it does mean that promoting the common good in our democratic system

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requires us to work together to provide each other with certain rights and opportunities. And in return it requires each individual to be responsible to themselves for themselves and on behalf of their families.

This is what we now must work to define. During the 1960s we argued endlessly over that as we worried about the proper position to take with respect to the major issues of that decade. What was the individual's responsibility to speak out and act out against conditions that he or she thought were wrong.

And the most eloquent explanation I have heard about the individual's responsibility to society comes from Vaclav Havel, the playwright who is now the President of the Czech Republic. He went to prison during the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia because he could neither be free as an individual nor responsible as a member of a community. And he wrote from prison to his wife Olga, "Everything meaningful in life is distinguished by a certain transcendence of human experience beyond the limits of mere self-care toward other people, toward society, toward the world. Only by looking outward, by caring for things that in terms of pure survival, you needn't bother with at all, and by throwing yourself over and over again into the tumult of the world with the intensity of making your voice count -- only thus will you really become a person."

And there are two great issues now on the horizon of our country where all of us have a chance to feel that intensity and make that contribution. The first is national service. And in many ways, the roots of the idea of national service were planted in this university in 1960 at a rally on this campus at the student union by President John F. Kennedy. (Applause.) When President Kennedy, at 2:00 a.m. in the morning, asked how many students were willing to contribute to their country, to use their skills and their intelligence to help people around the world, he was challenging that generation to seek a greater purpose in life. And he knew that a free society's ability to compete in the world depends upon the willingness of citizens to help others to help themselves. Don't just, as the old saying goes, give a fish to a hungry person; do that, but then help that person to learn how to fish. Reach out and give that person the tools needed to become self-sufficient and responsible. (Applause.)

And today, the need for that call to responsibility is as great as ever. During the last presidential campaign, President Clinton stood on the steps of Rackham and talked about service programs, and called, in his inauguration for a season of service, a call which more than 4,500 students on this campus have already answered with community service this year.

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And then yesterday, my husband offered his own national service plan, a domestic Peace Corps that will help young people pay for college or job training by performing community service, helping children learn to read and write, working in hospitals, helping the homeless, cleaning up the environment. Helping yourself by helping others -- the classic way that we try to reconcile right and responsibilities, and which really fuels the meaning of citizenship in this country.

And for many of you who are not yet sure about your own futures -- what kind of job you will get, where you will live, what kind of life you will lead -- this opportunity to contribute is still available, because there are always ways for you to look around and help. The small ways, added one to the other, make big differences.

And the second great issue is health care. Because if we do not deal with the health care crisis that is affecting all of us, we will not be able to put our country on a firm and stable footing for the future. We have to be determined to deal with all of the other problems -- to reduce the deficit, to create jobs, to provide better opportunities for people.

But at the root of our economic and human challenge lies the fact that, although we are the richest country in the world, we spend more money and take care of fewer people than many countries that are not as rich as we when it comes to health care.

What I have heard as I've traveled around this country, from state to state, are stories of people who are employed with insurance, not sure whether they will have it next year, worried about the layoffs; worried about the plant picking up and moving; worried about the end of what they thought they didn't have to worry about at all before. And so many others who work every day for a living have no insurance at all.

Most people in this country who are uninsured get up every day and go to work. They would be a lot better off when it comes to health care if they went on welfare. What kind of signal is that to our citizens, if we provide opportunities for people who do not work and turn our backs on the people who are in this stadium today who have sacrificed to enable you to attend this university, but themselves can't count on health care if they need it when they leave here this afternoon? (Applause.)

And it is not just an economic issue, and not just an individual human issue. If we look at a state like Michigan we can see how competitively we have given away advantage after advantage over the past years, because our auto companies, for example, pay more in health care benefits because they cannot control costs in a

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system that has gone crazy, and the expense of those health care costs make the automobiles produced in this state much more expensive than those with which we compete from around the world. We have essentially said to our manufacturers, tie both arms behind your back; be at a disadvantage; have to lay off workers because we, your government, will not control the health costs that you face every day.

If we do nothing, the current money we now spend, which is 14 percent of all goods and services produced in America, will rise by the year 2000 to over 18 percent. That means that unless we change now, by the year 2000 almost \$1 out of every \$5 that you and every American earn will be spent on health care. And we will not have insured one more American, provided better health care in our rural areas or inner cities. This is a problem we can no longer ignore.

We need to give peace of mind and security to every American, and we need to have the courage to change. The plan that the President will come forward with will do just that. You will have the right to choose your own doctor. You will have the right always to have health care no matter who you work with. If you change jobs, if you lose your job, you will not lose your health care. (Applause.)

If you have a preexisting condition, you will be insured. (Applause.) And if you are an older American, you will get some help on prescription drug costs and a beginning of a long-term health care system to give you the dignity and respect you deserve to have. (Applause.)

And if you are a physician or a nurse or a pharmacist or a dentist from one of the schools here on this campus, you will no longer be spending 20 to 40 percent of your time and income on filling out countless, meaningless forms that have to be sent to the checkers who check the checkers in the current system. (Applause.)

And if you are an employer, you will see these extraordinary premiums that you have been paying and struggling with stabilize and begin to decrease. And what we will find is a society where, once again, all of us have a right to be taken care of, have a right to have access to the finest health care in the world, but have to be responsible by taking care of ourselves, by seeking out primary and preventive health care so that we don't permit our health to deteriorate.

There will be something in this proposal for everyone to do. And there will be ways for all of us to change. But this is one of these moments in history when we talk about national service and

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health care that give us the opportunity to feel fully alive and engaged, and to know that we will not only be helping ourselves but we will truly be building the kind of community that we will be proud and grateful to live in.

These are very exciting and difficult times. But each of you can make a contribution. And I expect that in your various ways you each will be looking for ways to do that. Be involved. Make your voice heard. Embrace the challenges and don't lose heart when the buzzer sounds, because there will always be ways for you to demonstrate your excellence if you don't give up.

And it is the same for our country. We really are at a fork in the road. Will we end the denial of the last years in which everything was fine and those on the top prospered, while those in the middle and the poor saw their opportunities diminish? Will we continue to live in a sense of unreality that we don't have to get our deficit down, we don't have to balance our budget, we don't have to provide jobs for people who, through no fault of their own, are being replaced by machines and automation and robots? Will we take on the challenges of our disintegrating family structure and our violent communities? I think we will. And I think the class of 1993 will be there to make sure that we do.

Thank you. And Godspeed. (Applause.)

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