

5/27/95
SAN FRANCISCO STATE
UNIVERSITY COMMENCEMENT

PHOTOCOPY
PRESERVATION

REMARKS BY
FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
AT THE SAN FRANCISCO STATE UNIVERSITY
COMMENCEMENT CEREMONIES
MAY 27, 1995

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(Applause.)

PRESIDENT CORRIGAN: You have become an exemplar for a diverse nation. In you, we see the power of the committed individual, the value of woman's full partnership in the life of our nation and the richness of a life that is joyously balanced between involvement with one's family and friends and immersion in the greater society.

Hillary Rodham Clinton, you exemplify the very highest values we could hope to instill in these, our students, or to live by ourselves. And it is a joy and a privilege to award you this degree.

And by the authority invested in me by the Board of Trustees and on behalf of the California State University, I hereby confer upon you, Hillary Rodham Clinton, San Francisco State University's highest honor, the degree of Doctor of Laws, with all of the rights, honors, and opportunities which it imparts.

Trustee Falgatter and Trustee Campbell having already invested you with the hood, we will give you the degree.

(Applause.)

HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON: Thank you very much.

(Applause.)

HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON: I have been, I suppose, to many commencements. But I don't think I have

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1 HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON: You know, I have been
2 asked several times, why am I here making a commencement
3 address at San Francisco State University. Well, I think
4 it's already been proven and attested to by earlier
5 speakers that this is a great public university. And it
6 is also a university that represents the full diversity
7 and possibility of America. It is a university --

8 (Applause.)

9 HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON: -- that takes the
10 education of all people seriously: women, minorities,
11 immigrants, refugees. Everyone who is willing to work
12 hard and accept responsibility is welcome here. And
13 that's the kind of university I wanted to come to to say,
14 "Thank you for doing what you do to build students and
15 America."

16 (Applause.)

17 HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON: You know, there are so
18 many subjects that are discussed in commencement
19 addresses. And usually by about this time, all of the
20 graduates are looking at their watches and thinking, "How
21 much longer will this go on?" And every person in the
22 position of any of us here on the podium is desperately
23 trying to say something that might possibly be memorable,
24 mostly failing, occasionally succeeding. But usually the
25 idea behind commencement addresses is to try to give
26 advice to graduates about their impending journey into

1 the adult world.

2 You've already received some great advice.

3 From Annette Bening, you've heard: Find work you love.

4 Invest yourself in it. Bring your passions to it.

5 From Cecil Williams, you've seen in action what

6 faith in something besides yourself and the material

7 world can bring: joy and commitment and service to

8 yourself, your family, your community, and humanity.

9 You've heard already what distinguishes this

10 university and makes it so special and so important.

11 Many of you in this graduating class are older than the

12 average graduating student around the country today. You

13 have already paid your dues.

14 (Applause.)

15 HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON: Many of you have

16 worked full time or part time, have raised families, have

17 taken on all kinds of additional responsibilities. And I

18 think that probably the motto of this university really

19 is lived out in your own lives: Experience teaches. And

20 you have brought your experience to this campus.

21 What I would like to spend just a few minutes

22 talking about is why what you have experienced here is

23 critical for not only yourselves, but for those young

24 people and older ones who will come after.

25 Our society, our country, and this state in

26 particular have historically believed that education was

1 a collective responsibility, that it needed to be
2 provided, because we understood that education could make
3 such an important difference in the lives of all of us.
4 And yet, today, we know that education is under attack.
5 We know that there are those among us who would, in
6 effect, pull up the ladders of opportunity after they
7 have already climbed to the heights.

8 We have to take a strong stand on behalf of the
9 importance of education and universities like this. And
10 all of you who are graduating today and all of your
11 family members and friends who have sacrificed to bring
12 you to this point, I hope each of you will raise your
13 voices on behalf of education in America.

14 Education is not only important for acquiring
15 facts or knowledge, it's not only important for acquiring
16 skills to prepare oneself for making a living, it is also
17 about learning how to meet the challenges of one's time,
18 how to solve problems and adapt to new circumstances. It
19 is also about building a broader understanding of our
20 world. And that means building one's capacity for
21 tolerance and compassion and responsible behavior.

22 It is also about defining one's place in the
23 world and creating one's personal identity against the
24 backdrop of how others have lived throughout history.

25 And education is not and no longer can be, if
26 it ever were, a one-shot experience. There are all kinds

1 of people in our society who need to learn and want to
2 learn. They range from the very young to the very old.
3 That's why it is so important that we preserve a broad
4 range of educational opportunities for all Americans,
5 beginning in childhood and carrying on throughout life.

6 Yet, as has already been eluded to, you know
7 there is a movement afoot in state capitols and the
8 nation's capitol to retreat on the importance of
9 education and education funding, a retreat that is marked
10 by a rather unusual argument: That slashing education
11 funding is being done for the good of our children, that
12 cutting back on education will enable us in some
13 miraculous way to provide more and better opportunities
14 than we now enjoy.

15 Nothing could be further from the truth.

16 (Applause.)

17 HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON: If we -- if we sound
18 the retreat on education in our society, we deny the
19 opportunity of pre-school and Head Start to hundreds of
20 thousands of pre-school children; we deny tens of
21 thousands of elementary school students the resources
22 they need to improve their reading and math skills; we
23 deny summer jobs and learning opportunities to young
24 people; we deny the opportunity of college to millions of
25 Americans by shrinking loans, making them less flexible,
26 and raising interest payments; and we deny training that

1 ever been to one with more enthusiasm or excitement or
2 energy than this one. And thank you for letting me be
3 part of it.

4 (Applause.)

5 HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON: President Corrigan and
6 administrators and faculty, alumni and trustees, all of
7 you who support and work in this great university, thank
8 you for this honorary degree. But thank you most of all
9 to the honored members of the class of 1995 for inviting
10 me to be part of this celebration.

11 I also want to thank and congratulate all of
12 the parents and relatives and friends who are gathered
13 here today, whose support and encouragement are reflected
14 in those purple and gold degrees that will be awarded to
15 all of you.

16 (Applause.)

17 HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON: The investment that
18 you have made in these students' education is one of the
19 soundest and most important investments you could ever
20 make. It is also one of the smartest investments any
21 society can make. And I hope that both families and
22 societies will continue to understand that education is
23 the most important priority to build strong and good
24 citizens and strong and good societies now and into the
25 future.

26 (Applause.)

1 has enabled millions of young people to change careers
2 and acquire new job skills to earn a decent living.

3 I don't think denial is a good idea in an
4 individual's life or in the life of a society. I think
5 one has to meet the challenges of one's time head on.
6 And to pretend that we can meet those challenges without
7 investing in our young people, without investing in
8 education, is the ultimate in denial and can only bring
9 problems to all of us if we persist in believing it.

10 (Applause.)

11 HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON: It is particularly
12 ironic that those who profess to worry about the loss of
13 civility and character in our society are on a crusade to
14 obliterate national service and the education program
15 known as Americorps.

16 You know about community service here at San
17 Francisco State. You support more than 100 programs
18 using community and student resources to confront issues
19 ranging from homelessness to youth violence to teen
20 pregnancy to health problems to the environment. You are
21 also a partner with Americorps. Here is an idea that has
22 now been made into a program, built on the ideals of hard
23 work, discipline, sacrifice, and community service. It
24 is about rewarding people for being good citizens.

25 The men and women participating in Americorps
26 and other service programs are doing so because they

1 really want to help people in need. They want to serve.
2 And all they get in return is modest assistance with
3 college tuition.

4 But now we are telling these young men and
5 women that their mission of service, helping others, and
6 caring about the larger community really isn't valued
7 much in our society. We are, in effect, telling them
8 that service and character doesn't matter much.

9 Well, I think we ought to stand up and say that
10 education is about building character. Service is about
11 building character. Character is one of the anchors of
12 our society. But what we mean by "character" is not just
13 talking the talk, but walking the walk and building a
14 civil society that actually lives up to its ideals.

15 (Applause.)

16 HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON: It is not that
17 Americans lack character, it is that society too often
18 has stopped rewarding it. Just look around and you will
19 see the effects of what one political scientist has
20 called "turbo-charged capitalism." We have allowed
21 consumerism and materialism to go unchecked, to run
22 rampant through our culture, dictating our tastes and
23 desires, our values and dreams.

24 Through our various media, we are fed a daily
25 diet of sex, violence, perversity, social dysfunction,
26 and unrealizable fantasies. We live too often in a

1 disposable, throw-away society, where the yearning for
2 profits and instant gratification overshadows the need
3 for moderation and restraint and investing for the long
4 term.

5 The question for all of us is, do we define
6 ourselves by our style or our substance? By the logo on
7 our sneakers or the generosity in our hearts? By the
8 celebrity we crave or the reputation we earn?

9 Every one of us, and especially all of you who
10 are graduating, will have to ask yourselves those
11 questions. Remember what it feels like years from now
12 when you stood up to give a standing ovation to Cecil
13 Williams when you are faced with being asked to help make
14 a contribution to your larger community. Remember what
15 it felt like when you applauded Annette Bening, who said,
16 "Find work you love," when you are tempted to leave
17 something you love to work for more money doing something
18 you don't even like very much.

19 We have so many opportunities in our society
20 today to begin to turn the corner on what it means to be
21 an American moving toward the 21st century. We were
22 reminded of how important those questions we must ask
23 ourselves are by the tragedy in Oklahoma City. Yes, it
24 was horrendous and horrific to see the damage that was
25 wrought by hatred. But we also saw a generosity of
26 spirit. We saw our national character at work. We could

1 feel the sense of responsibility that always comes out in
2 time of need toward our larger community.

3 So what we must do is think hard about what
4 your educations have given you and what the values are
5 that you will live by as you apply those educations.

6 Many of you know that I recently returned from
7 a trip to south Asia with my daughter. And I had the
8 opportunity to visit five countries that are struggling
9 to become full-fledged democracies and free market
10 economies to provide real opportunity for their people.

11 There is something very humbling about shaking
12 the hands of men and women who have paid the ultimate
13 price for democracy, people whose husbands and mothers
14 and sons and fathers have been assassinated because they
15 worked to bring people together to build a stronger and
16 freer society, people who have paid the price in torture
17 and exile and imprisonment, and to know that all over the
18 world today, from the many countries represented here,
19 people are trying to build a society based on the ideals
20 we espouse.

21 And so when I came home, I couldn't help but
22 wonder, why do we spend so much time in a bad mood in
23 America today? We have so much to be grateful for. We
24 have so many blessings that have been given to us in this
25 country.

26 Each of us, in our own way, can start to make

1 clear that we value the things that really matter, that
 2 make a difference in the lives of the people we love and
 3 care about and work with. Kindness. Kindness matters.
 4 Truth. Truth matters. Patience, hard work, tolerance,
 5 discipline. All of these matter. Gratitude matters,
 6 especially on a day like today. Forgiveness matters.

7 Your education has opened many doors. How and
 8 whether you walk through them and how you conduct
 9 yourselves once you are through them is up to you.

10 So value your education and stand up for
 11 education in the public debates now going on in our
 12 country, strive for excellence in whatever you choose to
 13 do, and you will truly be a millennial generation that
 14 puts the "civil" back in "civilization."

15 Congratulations to all of you on your
 16 accomplishments, but also for the promise that you hold
 17 not only for your own lives, but for our country.

18 Thank you and Godspeed.

19 (Applause.)

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