To The Class of 1986

Fair Winds and Following Seas

A Commencement Address
By ADMIRAL WILLIAM J. CROWE JR.
Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff
Whenever Admiral William J. Crowe Jr. speaks, the world listens. Indeed the nation's media was tuned in to his May 10 address to the 1986 graduates of the University of Oklahoma. But on this windy Saturday afternoon, Bill Crowe had not come home to the OU campus to make pronouncements as his country's highest ranking military officer. The Oklahoma City native, who preceded his Annapolis career with a tour of duty as president of the OU freshman class, was in town to congratulate his fellow Sooners, to counsel them on dedication, optimism, open-mindedness and the ability to laugh at themselves.

A fellow Oklahoman who has a long association with this University, it is an understatement to say that I am thrilled to be with you today in this exciting setting and to share the sense of enthusiasm, anticipation and freedom that attends all graduation ceremonies. I don't know of any ceremony in our country that more graphically displays and demonstrates what our country is all about.

Commencement addresses fade rapidly—perhaps in a matter of seconds—but what will not be forgotten about today is that the Class of 1986 has successfully completed a hard, long and challenging curriculum and is graduating. You have cleared all the hurdles, slain all the dragons, knocked aside all the windmills which four years ago stood between you and a diploma. Today we are rightfully celebrating that achievement. On behalf of all the guests and parents and friends assembled, I salute you and extend our warmest wishes.

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Speaking of parents, I strongly believe that they likewise should be accorded special recognition today. I am confident that the graduates would be happy to divide their glory with you. After all, you have made a substantial contribution to the whole process—including money, comfort, encouragement and probably a respectable share of nagging and prodding.

At the same time, if my own experience is any guide, you have not only paid a financial but a physical, mental and psychological price. In the name of the students, I would like to thank all of the parents.

One further aside. If you as parents have found the road to this day unduly taxing, you might profit from a bit of advice I saw on a bumper sticker a few months ago. It said: "Avenge yourself. Live long enough to be a problem to your children."

In a more serious vein, I must confess to a certain amount of apprehension, because drafting a commencement address is a tough proposition. First of all, you know your audience has other things on its mind than listening to one more lecture. Second, the speaker is never given a topic, but at the same time is expected to inspire and to encourage his listeners with stirring remarks about nothing in particular.

That my guidance for today was vague did not come as a surprise. I learned early in my school career that academicians have a strong tendency to speak in generalities, and when you most want specific answers, to leave you on your own.

As a young and struggling student right here in Oklahoma, I had a number of teachers insist that a man becomes what he thinks about. This, of course, was designed to encourage studiousness and high thoughts. I accepted it for a while, but as I matured I discovered it was misleading advice. If it were true that a man becomes what he thinks about, by the time I was 18, I would have been a girl.

In any event, lacking a subject or definitive instructions, I turned to my own experience for help, as all commencement speakers do. As I contemplated the 43 years since I walked this campus, and the 40 years since I graduated from the Naval Academy—since I faced the world as you do now, with a degree but with little work experience, with high hopes but little actual know-how—a few special guideposts seemed to spring out.

They are not specific directions but pieces of general advice, which in retrospect seemed to apply to all lines of work and which have made it easier for me to adjust to pressure, to change, to disappointment and also to good fortune. Don't misunderstand. I am not saying that I have always been able to successfully put these concepts into practice, but I would have been better off if I had.

In sum, they concern how we approach life, and for me, they emphasize the value of a truly educated, open and fair mind in today's complex world. I would like to share these thoughts with you for just the next few minutes.

There's a strong tendency today in this country—even among commencement speakers—to deplore the state of the world, to wring one's hands and to fantasize about the past—the good old days. My own experience suggests that these prophets of gloom overlook an awful lot that has gone on in the past and simply ignore the steady progress that has been made over the centuries.

This is not to say that we don't have global anxieties. You do not have to be told that our own society has strains and that we live under a number of clouds. I suspect that you have discussed these questions in many a classroom, seminar, forum and bull session during the past four years. Undoubtedly, it will take great energy, imagination and leadership to meet these challenges. But to conclude that because we have serious problems that we are going to the dogs is sheer nonsense.

The European of the 1400s who experienced the Black Plague, who didn't even know why his friends were dying, would not agree that we have not progressed. Neither would the Spanish seamen who sailed with the Armada, nor the Bedouin Arab who lived on the margins of starvation for centuries, nor those unfortunate peoples overrun by the Mongol con-
ing success in a 40-hour week. Robert
heard of anyone making an outstand-
ing time a week, although I have never
been paid for about 40 hours of produc-
tive work. The globe since its beginning has
confronted terrifying challenges, and yet it is still revolving on its axis. In
fact, it is more exciting and vibrant
today than it has ever been.

It is sort of curious that older people
often decry the state of affairs in ad-
ressing their offspring, but if given
the opportunity, would exchange
places with them without a minute of
hesitation.

Art Buchwald put it this way: "I
don't know whether this is the best of
times or the worst of times, but I can
assure you it's the only time we've got."
No matter what you read in the news-
papers or see on television, we are all
going to make it. For 200 years this
country has muddled through one
crisis after another, and without
changing our form of government.

Buchwald cites Watergate as the ul-
timate test. Two hundred million
people were able to change presidents
overnight without "one tank or hel-
meted soldier in the street" or "one
bloody death." Any country that can do that can't be all bad.

The bottom line is that you should
direct your energies to further improv-
ing our condition without being bur-
dered with worrying about our decline
and fall. With time you will discover
that such an attitude not only better
acords with the facts, but also will
assist you in leading a more balanced
and fruitful life.

Of course, it takes more than op-
timism to thread the rocks and shoals
which block the way. In my experience,
the greatest joy a human being can
know is the joy that you celebrate
today—the joy of accomplishment—
the joy of completing a job well done.
This joy can be boundless when we
make full use of our minds, our tal-
ents, our time.

The average person in our country
is paid for about 40 hours of produc-
tive time a week, although I have never
heard of anyone making an outstanding
success in a 40-hour week. Robert
Frost once said: "Work hard eight
hours a day so you can be promoted.
Then you work hard 12 hours a day."

In any event, the 40-hour week
leaves the individual 128 hours a week
to do with as he pleases. In essence,
this means your society today offers
you unparalleled opportunities to en-
gage your abilities—in a profession,
in a business, in volunteer work, in
church participation, hobbies, commu-
nity service, self education, etc.

But no matter where you choose to
put the emphasis and to invest your
efforts, the important thing is to give
it your best shot—not just occasion-
ally, but all the time. There are no
guarantees with your diploma. The de-
gree may widen your opportunities,
but future achievement, results, satis-
faction depend on what you have yet
to do. Believe me, in the long run you
can never expect to receive more than
you earn. This advice may not comfort
you, but like the Law of Gravity, it's
an inescapable fact.

An individual who does not con-
tinue to learn and grow as a person is
no better than one who cannot. New-
ton D. Baker wisely pointed out that,
"The man who graduates today and
stops learning tomorrow is unedu-
cated the day after." Think of your life
as a piece of farmland. It can only re-
turn to you what you first give to it.
Making full use of your abilities, your
plot of ground will return to you and
yours an abundance that will amaze
and delight you.

I never use that analogy that I'm
not reminded of the small town minis-
ter who was driving through the coun-
tryside. He came upon a particularly
well-tended farm. It was green and
productive and just generally impres-
sive. He stopped and walked over to
the fence and said to the farmer who
obviously worked the land, "Brother,
the Lord has seen fit to give you an
awfully wonderful farm." The farmer
thought about it a minute and said,
"Well, I guess that's right, Pastor, but
I wish you'd a seen it when He gave it
to me."

In fact, many of your rewards in life
will be unexpected ones. People take
notice of a job well done, and new op-
portunities often follow. In preparing
these remarks, I read several gradu-
ation addresses. In practically every in-
stance, the speaker mentioned that his
career on one or more occasions had
taken a completely unforeseen turn,
normally for the better. In most cases,
this good fortune was not the result of
clever manipulation or some master
plan, but it opened up because the
individual had drawn attention to him-
self by doing a good job—often a job
that had little direct relation with the
new offer.

At times the path will be difficult,
boring, discouraging and certainly not
well marked. But if you take each step
as well as you can and keep on walk-
ing, you eventually will reach high
ground. Abraham Lincoln once said,
"When I was a young boy, I didn't know
what I wanted to do with my life, but
I prepared myself for the opportunity
that I knew would come my way." I
could not call a better witness to tes-
tify on behalf of doing a good job.

I will not even try to imagine the
world you will see 20 years from now.
It is changing even as I speak. But one
thing I can say with certainty, it will
demand minds and leaders of the
greatest sensitivity, imagination and
flexibility. The pace of change today is
mind boggling. More technological
progress will be made in the next 35
years than has been made in the last
50,000. In fact, over three-fourths of
all the scientists and mathematicians
who ever lived are still alive today.
Every decade thousands of new prod-
ucts, concepts and technologies enter
our economic life with their accom-
panying social problems.

For example, the personal computer
threatens to disrupt my only lifestyle.
Five years ago, I had never given a
thought to whether computers would
be "user friendly," to my Pac Man score
or to my wife's recipe file. All of these
things have suddenly taken on a new
importance because an infernal
machine called a "PC" is now in the
house. Now I am having to learn a
whole new way of thinking and talk-
ing so I can interact with my computer
without hurting its feelings. At my
age, that's not easy to do.

But it certainly does suggest to us
why a great many of our problems
tem from people predicting that past
trends would continue or refusing to
adapt to new circumstances. Witness
the failures of our steel industry, au-
tomobile manufacturers and savings and loan institutions to adjust promptly to their competition.

Right now, as you complete four years of college education, I suspect that most of you approach the outside world with comparatively open minds, willing to entertain new ideas and many new points of view. In fact, you probably deplore what appears to be the narrow outlook and predictability of many of your elders. Mark Twain said, “You tell me where a man gets his corn pone, and I’ll tell you what his opinions are.”

He was right, of course. Bankers, military people, doctors, journalists, farmers, lawyers, stockbrokers, television executives, all develop their own stereotype view of the world, which often leaves little room for change or invention or appreciation for the opinion of others.

But don’t forget, they were once just like you—new graduates, doing through a commencement speech and determined to remain open minded. But it didn’t work that way. They entered a certain industry or profession and were gradually entrapped in its patterns of thinking and doing.

Jane Bryant Quinn, a noted columnist, calls such people “prisoners of their vocabulary—the vocabulary of their work world.” She goes on to point out that the greatest risk new graduates run is that when they enter industry or a profession, “their minds will pick up its ideas, then close and sink like a stone.” In turn, their intellects soon “vanish without a trace.” In other words, they become the “narrow-minded adults, whose existence they once failed to understand.” She’s dead right, and what she describes is more the norm than the exception.

I urge you to reject that path and to nourish the spirit of inquiry which the University of Oklahoma has planted. This ambition involves keeping a broad circle of acquaintances, wide reading, developing interests outside of your work, seriously listening to others, even your critics, and constantly seeking fresh points of view. Quinn says, “You should begin to worry when you start sounding like everyone else you know.”

I personally witnessed a man wrestling with this problem a few months ago in New York City. I was in a taxi and asked the driver who he was going to vote for in the next election. He said that his whole family—including his grandparents, parents, brothers and himself—had always voted for Party X. I surmised, therefore, that he would vote for Party X this time. He hesitated for a moment and said, “No, I think I’m going to vote for Party Y. There comes a time in every man’s life when he’s got to ignore his principles and do the right thing.” I couldn’t have put it better.

Your mind is something like a parachute. It won’t help you if it won’t open when you need it. But do not underestimate this task. Given the pressures and the specialization of the modern world, you will have to work continuously at keeping an open mind. But the rewards are great. This capacity is the foundation on which a man or woman can build genuine integrity and self-esteem. To be able to change your mind when the facts warrant doing so is the hallmark of an educated person. You could pay no greater tribute to this great university than winning the constant fight to maintain your intellectual freedom, independence and perspective.

I have just one more piece of amateur wisdom to offer. As you progress and mature, nothing will stand you in better stead than a sense of humor. In a perfect or ideal world, this would not be so important. We could be serious about every subject without harm. But unfortunately, life does not meet that criterion. There is no line of work, no endeavor, no institution, no achievement, no failure that doesn’t have its ludicrous or ridiculous aspects. To recognize that simple lesson is a first step toward maturity.

Alan Alda, better known as Hawkeye of “M*A*S*H” fame, expounding on his own philosophy, contends that “to be playful about the most serious things is a trait of the most dedicated person.” It is a “mark of closeness and involvement, not antagonism.” He may have been rationalizing his own rather irreverent attitude, but I do believe there is a great deal of truth in what he says.

I must emphasize that I do not just mean the ability to appreciate a joke or tell a good story. In my book, a man who cannot make fun of himself does not have a sense of humor. The fringe benefits of being able to laugh at your own frailties, pomposity, pretense or mistakes are many. It is an essential part of remaining humble, relaxed and in touch with reality.

I watched Mr. George Burns on television a few years ago. He said that in his career he had tried singing—no one listened. He tried dancing—no one liked it. He tried comedy—no one laughed. He tried serious acting, and everybody laughed. By the time he discovered that he didn’t have any talent, he was too big a star to quit. I cannot think of a better example of how laughter can have a positive impact on every man’s life than George Burns, who at the age of 90 is still going strong and is still too big a star to quit.

In essence, a genuine sense of humor oils the gears of personal relationships. It lends perspective to complex problems, and above all, it helps keep you sane when the world closes in. And believe me, it will close in at times. I cannot imagine going through this world without lots of laughter.

In preparing for today, I tried desperately to recall my own graduation and what the speaker said. He was Mr. James Forrestal, the secretary of the Navy at that time. I have only one fleeting memory of his remarks. He counseled us to conduct ourselves, no matter what we did or where fortune called, so that we would always be welcome to return to our hometowns. It was good advice, and I suspect that Secretary Forrestal, if he were alive, would be thrilled that I could retain that story.

If you choose to remember anything about today, perhaps you could recall that the address was given by a career military officer who didn’t talk about Congressional appropriations, that he was high on life and doing a good job, that he counseled open-mindedness and believed that people should laugh a great deal, particularly at themselves.

With that, I commend the keeping of this country’s ideals and institutions into the hands of the Class of 1986. As we say in the Navy, may the Class of 1986 always have fair winds and following seas.