

Prepared Remarks of

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Thank you President Powers for your kind introduction; I am honored to be here.

When President Powers asked me to be the Honors Day speaker, I was, of course, flattered but a little puzzled. I went home and wracked my brain to discern why he would select me. After all, I'm a recent transplant to UT who grew up in the cold austere climes of New England. At first I thought – how clever – he's picked a graduate school Dean so none of the schools represented here would feel that they were being discriminated against. But then it dawned on me – the Boston-Austin connection.

Now, none of you are old enough to remember the Boston-Austin connection. In fact, most of your parents are barely old enough to remember. And of course, I'm not talking about the new Jet Blue non-stop service, for which my mother is eternally grateful since it gets her here more often to see her grandchildren. I'm talking of course about the political partnership of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, two extraordinary but very different leaders who made such an impact on my generation. What made both Kennedy and Johnson so remarkable was their ability to speak to, and inspire young people to make the most of their lives, and particularly to make a contribution to those who were less fortunate. Many of Kennedy's great phrases will live on in memory, but perhaps none so much as his words from his inaugural address – “ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can for your country.”¹

Both Kennedy and Johnson loved to speak to college students, and made many of their most important speeches to college audiences. Nearly 47 years ago, when he was campaigning for the Presidency, then Senator Kennedy traveled to another large public university, about 1500 miles north of here and challenged the University of Michigan students of his time to a new model of engaged citizenry here and abroad and thus, gave birth to the idea that became the Peace Corps. He ended his speech with these words:

“Let me say in conclusion, this University is not maintained by its alumni, or by the state, merely to help its graduates have an economic advantage in the life struggle. There is certainly a greater purpose, and I'm sure you recognize it.”²

¹ President John F. Kennedy, “Inaugural Address,” Washington, DC, January 20, 1961.

² Senator John F. Kennedy, “Address to Students,” University of Michigan Union, Ann Arbor, Michigan, October 14, 1960.

Four years later, President Johnson traveled to the same University and outlined his ambition to launch the Great Society. His words ring as true today as they did more than forty years ago.

“Within your lifetime powerful forces, already loosed, will take us toward a way of life beyond the realm of our experience, almost beyond the bounds of our imagination.

For better or worse, your generation has been appointed by history to deal with those problems and to lead America toward a new age. You have the chance never before afforded to people in any age. You can help build a society where the demands of morality, and the needs of the spirit, can be realized in the life of the Nation.”³

This idea of public service is at the heart of the school I’m honored to represent – the LBJ School of Public Affairs. When he founded the School, LBJ said:

“We have a School of Public Affairs offering training for careers in public service which will try to produce thinkers and doers: people who dream of progress and will try to turn those dreams into achievements.”⁴

But public service is not just for the graduates of the LBJ School, or the Kennedy School or the Bush School. Nor is public service simply a matter of running for office, or working for the government, worthy as these careers may be. Public service is incorporating a concern for the wider public good into whatever career you choose, whether in the private, non-profit or government sectors. Public service is part of all of our responsibilities as citizens. The importance of public service was reinforced by the worthy citizens of our community who served on the Commission of 125. (It’s hard for someone from New England to believe that anything in Texas is 125 years old, but this University next year will celebrate that milestone). In its fourteenth recommendation, the Commission stated, “The culture of the institution should convey to students, as well as to faculty and staff, that a commitment to service is intrinsic to a University of Texas Education.”⁵

As outstanding student scholars of a great public university, you are the beneficiaries of the far sighted founders of this state, who enshrined in the state’s Constitution a commitment to establish a University of the first class. You in turn have done right by their vision, by your achievements that we are honoring today, and which you and your families deserve to be proud.

³ President Lyndon B. Johnson, “The Great Society,” The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, May 22, 1964.

⁴ President Lyndon B. Johnson, “Remarks at the Dedication of the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library,” The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas, May 22, 1971.

⁵ Commission of 125, *Report of the Commission of 125* (Austin, Texas; The University of Texas at Austin, September 2004).

When I graduated from college, believe it or not, 34 years ago, our class day speaker was Arthur Miller. For those of you who are not in the College of Liberal Arts, Arthur Miller was one of the greatest playwrights of the twentieth century, and who also, by the way, was married for some time to Marilyn Monroe, both of which prove that there are great possibilities for people who graduate from a large public University with a degree in English. Miller was not only a great playwright, but also an individual who spoke out about the importance of human rights and freedom of speech, not only here in the United States, but also in the Soviet Union and the Communist world.

Miller was something of a fatalist about the human condition, as those of you who have read or seen his plays know. His speech that day in the spring of 1973 was full of his acerbic critique of millennialist movements, whether Karl Marx or the Maharishi Yogi. But he ended his speech with an uncharacteristic note of optimism. He said:

“A return from abroad always yields a faintly surprising experience of hope. It does keep changing here [in America], it does go on; the blind blundering search-which is not the case in more completed countries. Evidently we are not fated to be wise... but must spawn new generations that set out again for the space where evil and conflict are no more. It will not come – and it is coming.”⁶

The conviction of the young – you whom we are honoring today – that the world can be better – is the lifeblood of the future. Whether it is tackling the problem of poverty, of conflict, or decent and affordable health care, or the state of our environment – you can, and therefore you must make a difference.

Now I would be remiss, in failing to mention that there was second class day speaker when I graduated, my classmate and dorm-mate, Al Franken, who has gone on to prove that you can indeed become successful with a Harvard degree. Now I can't remember what Al said that day but I did see the text of his remarks when he returned to Harvard a few years ago.⁷ Most of what he said was characteristically in questionable taste, but he did conclude with some simple and sound advice – which was to thank your parents. So I will echo Al's wise remarks, and urge you to thank your parents and your teachers and your Deans, and thank you for the honor of being your speaker today.

⁶ Miller published his class day remarks in September 1973. Arthur Miller, “Miracles: A political letter to the young from the author once young himself,” *Esquire*, September 1973, pp. 112-115, 202-204.

⁷ Al Franken, “Class Day Address,” Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, June 5, 2002.