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"What Makes A Leader?"

Secretary of Transportation Andrew H. Card, Jr.

West Springfield High Commencement
Springfield, Virginia

Tuesday, June 16, 1992

Opening Comments

Thank you, Ramsey [Ramsey Gregg, Class President]...friends
and family of the distinguished Class of '92...members of the faculty
and administrative staff of West Springfield High...and ^{MOST OR ALL} deserving
graduates....

It's a real pleasure to be re-united with a school that's meant a
great deal to the Card family. When my wife and I were
contemplating our move from the Boston area to the Washington area,
this was in 1983, we had two daughters in high school, and we
wanted to find a high-quality high school down here for them.

Like parents everywhere, we wanted a school that would give our children every opportunity to grow as individuals. We decided to move to West Springfield based on reports about its high school.

Our own public school experience had provided exceptional education. And this has made us believe America's public schools are one of its enduring strengths.

The thing that I remember most about my own public school education is the opportunity provided to every student. Teachers, students, parents and members of the community provided the toil, the resources, the dedication, and the persistence to keep the desire to learn alive. If we lose that -- if even a small group of parents, teachers, citizens or students decide schools are not worth the effort, not worth the personal involvement -- then our places of learning *will* begin to crack and weaken. We can't afford to allow that to happen.

Like most of you, my family found what we were looking for at West Springfield High -- enthusiastic teachers, lots of creative energy, discipline and dedication and lots of learning taking place. I'm proud to remember when our daughters enrolled...and even prouder to recall their graduations -- Tabetha in 1986, Rachel in 1987.

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*Cheerleader
Cynocritics*

So, it's not entirely coincidental that I'm here tonight. I want to say thank you to the school that has so enthusiastically committed itself to teaching our children -- successfully, I might add, because both of my daughters went on to college and are pursuing careers.

No Sheltered Life

But beyond my personal attachment to your fine institution, I have given considerable thought to what I wanted to say to this Class of '92. I am not an expert about the future and will refrain from making predictions about what the world will look like even a few years from now. *no one could have predicted... and* As for the past four years...I expect there have been times when it has not been easy to continue to do what you know you had to do. I expect the future will pose similarly difficult choices.

But you have been well prepared. Your experiences go beyond book learning. Having been a parent of three teenage students -- my son will enter his senior year this September -- I know that high school has not sheltered you from many realities of life.

These realities include competition -- and a growing complexity of life that can be refreshing, rewarding, challenging -- as well as occasionally ego-bruising and, yes, sometimes even cruel.

Like many high school students all across America, you have had to deal with social realities such as inequality, racial tension, and violence. You have probably seen prejudice and small-mindedness; and maybe you have even had to endure criticism and controversy.

Without exception, you have met routinely with temptation: the temptation to break the rules, the temptation to exceed life's safe speed limits.

I know West Springfield High has not pampered you. It has not sheltered you from the way things really can be. While you have honed your educational skills -- you have also seen the rigors of reality.

The result is that you have been exposed to a world that offers risk and opportunity, joy and sorrow, good and bad. You have been exposed to right and wrong. Deep in your heart, I feel certain you always knew the difference between the two.

Now you are going out into this complex world -- and must make many decisions that will impact your success. At almost every turn you must decide which you will be -- a follower, or a leader. I want to focus on leadership this evening, because I want each of you to become a leader in some way. So

Leadership Qualities

To me, leaders exhibit three essential qualities: character, courage, and compassion.

By character, I really mean ethics -- high ethical standards. Ethics is my foundation of leadership.

The philosopher and psychologist William James said that the goal of education is to teach you to know a good person when you see one. I would add that another goal is to become such a person.

a good person.

My definition of ethics is not complicated. An ethical person knows what is right and does it. An ethical person is somebody who questions whether something is wrong, one who avoids even that which might appear wrong. My personal test is, does it feel right in the core of my being? If it does not, it's time to do some soul searching.

When a person has ^{character} ethics ~~and~~ character, he or she will not bow easily to peer pressure in making decisions.

As a leader who makes ethical decisions, you will earn the trust and respect of others.

What does this mean for your daily living. You notice I didn't say "real life." My daughters hated when people said, "When you get into the 'real world'" as if the world they lived in was unreal. Ethics in daily living means keeping your word. It means being honest, to yourself and to others. Some examples that come to mind are paying your taxes...telling the cashier that you've been undercharged...caring for your children...and being faithful when you get married.

Ethics in daily living means standing up for values that add majesty to our society -- values such as equality, liberty and justice. To me, this is what having character is all about.

Secondly, I think leaders also need courage -- the courage to act. Leaders do not shy away from the tough decisions...they MAKE them.

If I can digress here, when I was Deputy Chief of Staff at the White House, I watched President Bush make tough, timely decisions every day. He did so frequently with prayer -- and always with America's best interest at heart. I might add here that I feel most U.S. presidents had America's best interests at heart, although I admit my bias: I think our President is a real leader, and I think we need to value the people in our country -- of all political persuasions -- who work to make it better.

No one party has a monopoly on courage and presidential leadership. I can think, for example, of President Kennedy's courage when the cold war threatened to turn hot over the Cuban missile crisis. And I'm sure you each have other examples you could share.

Think about it...a true leader usually finds sitting out on a limb more comfortable than sitting on the fence. Robert Kennedy gave sound advice: "Only those who dare to fail greatly, ever succeed greatly. Strong leaders dare to make courageous decisions."

My advice to you, then, is to face the unknown with courage.

You may be asking yourself at this time, How am I going to finance higher education? Do I have what it takes to complete college, or military training, or my next job? *But* you will never know ^{what you can do} until you have the courage to try. Success is what comes from combining dreams with determined action. Dreaming alone doesn't cut it. The challenge is to keep setting your sights a little higher and a little higher. Before you know it, you'll be on top of the world.

Have the courage to make decisions with your life.

And finally, leadership is about compassion. Let me tell you ^a ~~two~~ stories. ~~The first is~~ about President Bush. A mother who had lost a son in Panama wrote the President -- wanting to speak with the person who sent her son into combat.

The President certainly could have taken the easy way out. He could have had someone write a polite letter for him, or he could have written it himself. He chose instead the direct and most difficult route -- the route of compassion. I was with the President when he met with that soldier's mother in Ohio. I will never forget that meeting; none of us present that day will.

*fears
~~agg~~ anger
 pride
 patriotism
 true compassion*

[RELATE STORY]

But compassion knows no rank. Let me tell you another story, which I related a few weeks ago to the Coast Guard Academy's graduating Class of '92. I'm happy to have the opportunity to repeat it.

During my first week as Secretary of Transportation, I visited the Coast Guard in Guantanamo. The Coast Guard is a very valuable facet of America's transportation network, and a part of the U.S. Department of Transportation.

While in Guantanamo, I heard about the crews of the Steadfast and Confidence -- two of the cutters that have been providing a crowded place of safety to hundreds of Haitian migrants.

These were families that for the most part left Haiti with next to nothing. And the ones who suffered the most were the children.

When they were first transferred to the U.S. ships, they were hungry and frightened. Although it was crowded, many felt all alone.

When the boats docked at Guantanamo Bay, scores of seamen -- these are not the officers, but the enlisted men and women, made a beeline for the Exchange. Except they didn't use their paychecks, which weren't big by any means, on themselves.

Almost to a person, they loaded up with toys, with candy and gum, with Coast Guard t-shirts, and with various other gifts they thought might make the lives of the children they had just met a little more comfortable. Then they returned to the boats immediately, with these simple offerings to help drive away fear and loneliness.

A leader never loses his or her capacity to care. Certainly everyone has the opportunity to care -- each and every day. The leaders I've known never let the rigors of the job or the stresses of life put blinders on their hearts. There's always enough time in the day to reach out to someone who needs help. And when you do -- you become a leader.

Leadership, then, is looking beyond yourself and reaching out to those in need...it is showing concern for the greater good through ethical actions...and it is having the courage to do what may be personally painful but deeply rewarding.

offices

These are my simple lessons. Character. Courage. Compassion.

For me, they form the bedrock of leadership. Applied by each of you, they will enrich your lives. Applied by enough people, they will change the world in miraculous ways.

*yetts in**Finally participat
Grandmother**We have what the rest
of the world
wants.*

As I said, I know first hand the quality of education you have received. Make the most of it. By your actions and your decisions -- be a leader. America needs them. America needs each of you.

May the future be good to you -- and may you be good to the future.

Good luck to you all, and I join your parents, friends and teachers in wishing you great success in the years ahead.