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COMMENCEMENT DAY
HIGH POINT CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL
HIGH POINT, NORTH CAROLINA
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Let me say at the outset that commencement days are never an easy time. For the graduating senior, they usually involve some painful partings and some numbing speeches, most of which revolve around the slightly mystical theme that the world is an oyster to be plucked open and robbed of the pearl that most assuredly lies within. This is encouraging to hear, but inaccurate to proclaim. To me, the purpose of ceremonies such as this is not to promise success, but to issue a challenge. To be sure, it's a chance to say "well done" and offer whatever wisdom age and experience and survival in that vaunted "real world" can claim. Equally important, for the speaker, commencement is a learning time, an opportunity to bask in the optimism and fresh thoughts of a generation richly endowed with both. Coming from Washington, D. C. -- that citadel of bureaucracy -- this is especially gratifying to me.

Commencement day at this high school weaves a common bond, since 20 years ago, I, too, was an about-to-be graduate of High Point Central. In the years since, I have learned that what we call the eternal truths -- severely-tested and well proven -- remain untarnished by time. They apply

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to all Americans equally. They suggest that we flee from basic principles only at our peril. For the last six years we have seen a renewed dedication in America to the fundamental political, moral and economic values on which this country was founded and a renewal of faith in ourselves and our future. These are the tools of a free society. How you choose to use them will determine your personal success.

Every person has two educations in life: one obtained in the classroom, one gained through real world experiences. Or as Yogi Berra once put it, "I never had any education, so I used my brain instead."

Your education at High Point Central has taught you that the right questions can be as important as correct answers. The diploma you receive today attests to your success in answering the academic questions posed during your years at High Point Central. But other questions remain: What can I do to make my country a better place to live? How do I use the opportunities a free society affords? What can I hope to achieve?

I cannot answer these questions for you as individuals, but as the last bit of advice you will receive before you leave here today with your diplomas, let me offer three basic suggestions to guide you in the years ahead ...

First. In your generation's America, you can be what you want to be. This is still the land of opportunity, where we are free to dream heroic dreams with the undiminished hope that those dreams can be achieved. In this land of freedom, fundamental choices are made by you -- not for you. But I would remind you that while you have the freedom to make choices, you do not have freedom from choice. This high school has prepared you for the decisions of life; no institution can protect you from them. Let your choices be excellence over expediency, long-term objectives over short-term temptations, and principles over privileges.

If you follow this strategy, you can, as President Reagan has said, "reach beyond the commonplace, and not fall short."

What I'm telling you was stated long ago by the Greek writer Aesop. In his fable The Traveler and Fortune, he wrote "Everyone is more or less the master of his own fate." What he said more than two thousand years ago still applies today. Each of us has the potential to accomplish anything to which we set our minds. Let me share an example with you.

Stevie Wonder has worked with the Department of Transportation in our campaign against drinking and driving and, therefore, I have occasion to know a little about his life. He has God-given talent and a determination to excel, and he has become one of the most successful entertainers of all time. He began to develop his talent even before he became a teenager. Stevie Wonder had to overcome the additional hurdles of blindness and later on severe injuries from an automobile accident. He is a living example of the truth that in this country you can be successful -- if you have the

determination and the discipline to persevere. Now he spends much of his time giving his talent to his fellow man through his participation in worthy causes. And he would want me to urge you to celebrate this wonderful day in your lives safely.

Now there is only one Stevie Wonder, but each of us has the potential to reach the goals we set for ourselves. We can't do it alone. We need the love of parents and our families, the support of friends, the instruction of others and an inner spirit of strength and purpose. Many of you may remember the film "Chariots of Fire." One of its heroes was the great Olympic runner Eric Liddle. Where did he get the strength to practice year after year, to overcome difficulties and doubts? The strength came from within, he said in the film. It's there for you too. But you must never give up, you must always try harder, improve your skills and not let the words "I can't do it" enter your vocabulary.

So today, I challenge you to excellence. It must be more than a slogan. It must be one of your guiding principles.

Second. Our world is not risk-free. Last week I had the opportunity while I was in Alaska to visit some of the men and women of the United States Coast Guard, which is a part of the Department of Transportation. They live and work in some of the most beautiful country anywhere on the face of the earth, but it can also be the most dangerous. When a storm lashes the sea into a deadly froth, when the fishing boats are racing into the safety of the harbor, these heroic men and women sail and fly out to sea to help others. Nobody drafted them; every single one is a volunteer. They risk their own lives to serve their nation and their fellow man. We all have to take chances; but if we make the right decisions, and if we act with courage and determination, the return on our efforts will far exceed the cost.

You don't have to look very far today to see a society percolating with fresh ideas. This hasn't always been so. Strangely, for a nation built by pioneers, we have spent a lot of time and energy in recent years looking for the sure thing, the lifetime guarantee, the ticket to security. We have wasted valuable time searching for the safe harbor to guard against the changing tide.

Too many in the generation just ahead of you swallowed the myth that government alone can somehow solve all our problems and shelter us from the hard knocks and the uncertainties of life. Many forgot that people come before government and that government derives both its moral authority and its creative energy from a society where sure things take a back seat to daring possibilities. Those people saw only one trend in our society -- the enlargement of government's role in our individual lives. I believe most of us have come to understand that there are proper limits on government's intrusion into any citizen's life. In fact, the boundaries set out in the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights still make sense today.

The point is: if we reject risk because we fear failure, then we miss much of the exhilaration of life itself. So do not seek or expect total insulation from the turbulence, the pressures or the uncertainties of life. Don't look for the "sure thing," because it doesn't exist, and do not be unduly discouraged by detours or disappointments. Failures are part of the price we pay for our success.

So you can face life with confidence and you can afford to take risks. President Theodore Roosevelt wrote a famous essay on boldness in which he said "It is not the critic who counts ... The credit belongs to the man in the arena... who strives valiantly, who errs and comes short again, who knows the great enthusiasm, the great devotions, and spends himself in a worthy cause. It is he who at best knows the triumphs of high achievement and at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly -- so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat."

So, today I am challenging you to take risks.

You have advantages that will give you an edge when you try to reach lofty goals. One, there's the love and support of your families. I know many of you have found in the last few years that your parents had different views on what responsibilities you were ready to assume. But never forget that their motivation for setting a few rules is one of love for you. Today you will see enormous pride in their eyes -- pride in what you have already accomplished and in what they know you will achieve in the future. Knowing they are behind you makes facing the next challenge in life a lot easier.

Two, you have the advantage of having graduated from an outstanding high school. I know, because I have the same diploma you will be awarded today, and the education I received here has served me well. And it is not just that you have received a first-rate formal education. Your class has distinguished itself in several ways, displaying excellence and leadership in athletics by producing an outstanding girls' basketball team and a state champion National Forensic League team. More importantly, you are known for your ability to pull together by building on the rich, diverse backgrounds of class members, rather than letting those differences divide you. Furthermore, each of you can think of a teacher who has gone out of his or her way to help you, to challenge you, to urge you forward. In my case, it was Mrs. Rachel Roberts, who spent hundreds of hours coaching me in debate and public speaking. She routinely gave up her afternoons and weekends to help those of us in the National Forensic League. I have thought often over the last 20 years of how much I owe her, and of what an inspiration she has been to thousands of her students.

When I arrived at college, I found myself sitting in class beside students from the finest private prep schools and public high schools in America. Never once did I feel my high school education suffered by comparison. Furthermore, I had one great advantage over the boys from the all-male prep schools, because I had the opportunity to date in high school,

while most of them were still scared to death of girls. Of course, they got over that fear quickly.

The third bit of advice I would offer you is to avoid the trap of the "ever expanding ladder." You know, when I was graduating from High Point Central, all I could think about was getting into a good college. If I could just do that, I thought, everything will be all right. Then, when I was in college I knew that if I could just get into a good law school then everything would be fine and I could relax. Of course, when I was in law school I worried about going to work for a good law firm, and then about making partner. As I looked ahead to each new goal, I felt that once achieved, all would be well and I'd be completely content. In the last few years, I have come to realize that you have to give yourself a little credit for where you are now, while continuing to aspire to greater achievements.

You should set personal and professional goals for yourself. The point is to avoid becoming so fixated on the next rung of the ladder that you don't fully enjoy the pleasures and challenges of the rung you're standing on now.

A corollary to this principle is that when you choose a particular job or career path, you should choose it because you enjoy the doing of it --not the real or imagined perks and prestige attached to it. I mean, don't become a doctor because you want a big income, golf on Wednesday afternoons, and the approval of strangers -- if what you really like is being outside laying bricks or hammering nails. You will be successful in life if you achieve the goals that are important to you, rather than those imposed on you by social pressures.

So, today, I am challenging you to aspire to excellence, to take risks, but to chart a course through life that makes sense to you and that you can enjoy.

As Winston Churchill told the young men and women of Great Britain during World War II, "You will make all kinds of mistakes, but as long as you are generous and true, and also fierce, you cannot hurt the world or even seriously distress her. She was made to be wooed and won by youth." The same is true today.

Congratulations and best wishes for every success.

