



THE JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY
RICE UNIVERSITY

REMARKS BY
JAMES A. BAKER, III
AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA
COMMENCEMENT

MAY 14, 2007

As Prepared for Delivery

President Gutmann, distinguished faculty, members of the Class of 2007, parents, and guests: It is a real privilege to be asked to give the commencement speech at this illustrious and historic university. Were Benjamin Franklin with us today, I am confident that he would be impressed at how his vision for this school has become a dynamic reality.

Knowing that most of you are eager to get on with your lives, I intend to follow advice from Ben Franklin, who understood the importance of brevity when he said: “He that speaks much, is much mistaken.”

Franklin certainly did have a way with the English language. As you embark upon your future, it would be wise to remember the wisdom that Ben Franklin wrapped into his cleverly-worded sayings that charm us with their simplicity and humor.

Of course, I am not talking about one of Franklin’s quotes that I, (and perhaps some of you), may have followed too closely at times: “Beer is living proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy.”

Instead, I refer to those witticisms that contain such a breadth of seriousness that, when they are properly embraced, they can guide your quest to become a better human being.

For example, as you conclude your college years, consider what Franklin meant when he said: “Some people die at 25 and aren’t buried until 75.”

He meant, of course, that one’s life should be an evolutionary journey, and he certainly was. He never stopped learning. He continually challenged himself and the world around him. Indeed, had he and our other founding fathers remained satisfied with the status quo, there might not have been an American revolution.

Similarly, each of you should conscientiously challenge yourself and the world around you because your generation must address complex problems including, but not limited to, international terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and global warming. Without revolutionary approaches developed through fresh and critical thinking, you risk the consequences that inspired another Franklin saying: “When you’re finished changing, you’re finished.”

But, allow me to focus on a virtue that Franklin considered as critically important: leadership, and especially the leadership inspired by civic duty.

Ben Franklin was a true republican -- with a small r. He emphasized that the American experiment would survive only if its people displayed the virtues required of civic duty and leadership in their daily lives.

So, leadership, is a worthy topic for this occasion today. This is not just because you are graduating from a top-flight university, but because, in a broader sense, this and every commencement symbolizes a first step in the transfer of leadership from one generation to the next.

The historian James MacGregor Burns defined leadership as “a commitment to values ... and the perseverance to fight for those values.”

I would say the same thing but a little differently. In my view, leadership is nothing more or less than “knowing what to do,” and then “doing it.” It is knowing what to do and then doing it when it is not the popular thing to do or when no one else may even know you are doing it. And leadership can be telling truth to power.

“Knowing what to do” and then “doing it.”

I want to give you three examples from history that illuminate the leadership challenges that can be posed by world events.

The first was the rise of Nazi Germany in the 1930s. In hindsight, we know that the world would have been spared endless misery if something had been done earlier, rather than later. But Western democracies were slow to respond.

A few in the West admired Hitler, but most simply didn't believe he was dangerous. Or if he was dangerous, they thought, he could be appeased.

Others saw the danger, but few saw it more clearly than the great British leader, Winston Churchill. In a nutshell, he said this: “Don't . . . appease . . . Hitler.” And, sadly, events proved him right.

When war came, Churchill said: “What is our aim? I can answer in one word. It is victory. Victory at all costs -- victory in spite of all terrors -- victory, however long and hard the road might be, for without victory, there is no survival.”

Winston Churchill knew what to do. And he did it.

Immediately after World War II, we faced a second totalitarian challenge, this time by an emergent and ambitious Soviet Union.

By 1980, with memories of Vietnam and the Iranian hostage crisis fresh in our minds, it was not clear that the United States -- or the West, generally -- was willing to speak up for its interests and values, much less act forcefully to defend them. Maybe we had overestimated the danger of communism, some thought. Maybe we should back off.

President Ronald Reagan, like Churchill before him, saw things more clearly. "What, then, is our course?" he asked in a famous 1982 speech. "Must civilization perish in a hail of fiery atoms? Or must freedom wither in a quiet, deadening accommodation with totalitarian evil?"

The answer, he said, was neither of these two bad choices. We must simply stay the course. If we did, communism would fail. It was, he said, destined for the ash heap of history.

His critics were appalled.

He was a shoot-from-the-hip cowboy, they said, unmindful of the complexities involved in practicing foreign policy. He was, some of them said, potentially more dangerous than those he condemned. Others feared that he had totally abandoned solid realism -- the view that our policy should serve our national interests -- in favor of idealism -- the view that we should harness policy to our national ideals.

But he was, in fact, doing both. His rhetoric soared, but his strategy was straight out of the playbook of *realpolitik*.

All questions about this strategy were answered finally, fully, and forcefully in November 1989. That's when East and West Germans took sledgehammers to the Berlin Wall and began pounding it into dust.

The Cold War was over and, more to the point, the West had won. Why? Because Ronald Reagan, like Winston Churchill -- (and, by the way, like the seven presidents before him, both Republican and Democrat) -- knew what to do. And did it.

And that brings me to my third case study, the first President Bush, whom I served as Secretary of State.

Even though the West had triumphed, the Bush strategy was to reject triumphalism. Figuratively speaking, he refused to dance on the Berlin Wall. The critics, as usual, were appalled. After forty years, the West had won! Didn't he understand? Didn't he care? Why did he show so little emotion?

But the president's vision was larger.

Under his leadership, we built strong diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and negotiated the “mother of all soft landings” --freedom throughout Eastern Europe and Central Asia, the reunification of Germany inside NATO, and the peaceful breakup of the Soviet Union.

Why did all this happen?

Because George Bush -- like both Ronald Reagan and Winston Churchill before him -- knew what to do. And he did it.

We judge those three leaders today by the quality of their decisions. And history has proved that those were the right decisions.

Likewise, history will judge each of us on the quality of our leadership, yours and mine.

I refer, of course, to our leadership in daily life -- in doing what is best for our families, our places of worship, our companies, and, of course, our communities and our nation.

Some say leadership is a rare thing, found only in dusty books, the private preserve of extraordinarily talented individuals, out of the reach of ordinary men and women.

But you tell that to the police officers and fire fighters who rushed into the Twin Towers on September 11. Tell that to the passengers who rushed the hijackers on United Flight 93.

In the United States and other democratic countries, leadership comes from the ground up, not the top down.

That is something that a Hitler or a Stalin would simply never understand.

To perform the duties of leadership for which we are destined, it is important that we never surrender to pessimism, especially the fashionable kind that expresses itself in a cynical or sarcastic spirit. Or the pessimism disguised in the perverse theory that we are all governed by vast historical forces, so why bother?

Instead, we must focus on our possibilities, not our limitations.

As you begin the next phase of your life, let this be your mantra: Go forth. Be leaders.

Make a personal history that your children, your grandchildren and your great-grandchildren will remember with honor 100 years from now. Make a history of hard work and care for your families. Make a history of good citizenship and, when circumstances require it, great citizenship.

Represent the best of American leadership.

And in every way you can, leave this world a better place than you found it.

So, to you, the graduates of the Class of 2007, to your parents, teachers, and friends:
congratulations on a job well done and God-speed to each of you in the challenging years ahead.

###