



Graduation 1999



Choices / Consequences

A Call to Courage with Conviction

By Rev. Jesse Jackson

I extend my heartfelt congratulations to all of the students who have learned and persevered; to the parents who have sacrificed; to the grandparents who built the foundation on which this great day stands; to the teachers who have imparted wisdom; and to the administrators who...well, who have done whatever it is that administrators do. I congratulate you all.

For those of you who are graduating, it is the commencement of your journey through life.

Indeed there exists a moral obligation to make choices...to stand on your own two feet...and that obligation begins today. These choices extend beyond the realm of private gain and personal gratification...they extend into the world of public gain and personal gratification...they extend into the world of public policy. You see, you emerge from the cocoon that school represents. You are now citizens of the world, of a nation, of a community...and you share responsibility with your fellow citizens for the way that world, that nation, and that community works.

And so, while our selfish impulses might tell us that nothing much matters that exists beyond our own noses, the better angels of our nature cause us to seek to build a better nation and to create a world that is more secure for all who live in it.

Every generation faces special challenges. The story of America is filled with chapters of how young people stepped up to these challenges; how they chose change over the status quo...and how they would not rest until that change was realized. Past generations of people no older than you are today did remarkable things: they fought World War 2, to combat Nazism, to preserve freedom and democracy; they fought a Civil War to end slavery; they provided a big part of the energy and idealism that fueled the civil rights movement. The end of legal segregation, the establishment of a universal right to vote and the birth of universal access to public education did not happen by accident. They happened because past generations, at their moment of truth, were willing to stand up and be counted...They happened because young people put themselves on the line, sometimes even risking their lives, for their conception of the public good.

Hopes and dreams, not fears and memories move our nation forward. And it is the hopes and dreams of the young that propel our nation in the right direction.

And so, what are the special challenges, the special public challenges, the special moral challenges by which your generation will be judged? Permit me to

suggest one or two.

First and foremost: the enormous run-up in wealth that our nation has enjoyed over the course of the past seven years must be more broadly shared.

The moral imperative of our day...actually, it is the moral imperative of your day...to leave no American behind.

The Marines have it right: there is no honor on the field of battle for those who save themselves at the expense of their fallen countrymen. Bury the dead, save the wounded; that is the way of the Marines.

As it is in war, so should it be in times of peace. There is no honor for a nation that leaves so many countrymen behind economically, especially when the overall performance of the economy is so strong. It is precisely at such a time, when our wealth is at its greatest, that the shame associated with such an unfair distribution of our nation's resources is most pronounced.

Let us save the wounded who live in our nation. Let us leave no American behind.

America has three principal weapons in its arsenal: missiles, morals, and minds. We must not permit our overconfidence in missiles to close our minds or undercut our moral authority.

You see; war is easier than peace. War is one-sided; it can be waged unilaterally. Peace requires two sides; it requires that all players come to the table; peace involves reconciliation; it requires building bridges of trust.

We must be prepared to build such a peace, even as we wage a war.

And so I call on this class, the class of 1999, to always be ready to do the more difficult thing. To walk boldly. To do justice.

The sworn enemy of those who would do justice is cynicism, the collapse of faith.

Great things are not achieved by cynics; they are achieved by believers.

Pessimism is for the faint at heart; the doers, the leaders will always be the optimists. You must have the courage of your convictions, a dignity-level that is not non-negotiable. That's what gave Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Jr., Cesar Chavez, Lech Walesa, and Bobby Kennedy lives worth emulating. In the face of material temptation, or in the face of a threat to your career or life, your dignity must remain non-negotiable.

Vanity asks the question, 'is it popular?' Politics asks the question, 'will it work, is it feasible?' Morality and conscience ask the question, 'is it right?' This is a haunting question of hope that will not go away - is it right? - whether in South Africa, southern Connecticut, Kosovo, Yugoslavia, or Moscow - is it right?

And so, let us call one another to act in faith and to reward good character. For character is constantly revealed by

our acts, by our choices. And nowhere is character more clearly revealed than in how one treats the least of these...

Beyond color and culture, there lies the high plateau of character. You inherit color and culture, you must earn character.

Remain faithful. Remain optimistic. Remain enthusiastic. Remain young in outlook. Fight the good fight. Keep hope alive!

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