

U.S. ATTORNEY GENERAL ERIC H. HOLDER, JR.
REMARKS TO COLUMBIA COLLEGE COMMENCEMENT
TUESDAY, MAY 19, 2009

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.

Sydney Murray- - campaign manager – pictures to view of young Syd

It is great to be home – and I really do mean home.

I was born just a few subway stops from here in the Bronx and grew up across the river in Queens. I went to Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan, and then for seven remarkable years – four as an undergraduate, then three as a law student -- this campus was my home. This City, This University, and especially this College, mean everything to me.

I lived in Carman Hall my freshman year – Carman 301A. And I have to tell you – when I found out there's air conditioning in Carman now, I couldn't believe it. What's next, President Bollinger? Hot and cold water? You kids today have it pretty easy.

Unlike every other freshman, I was not wide-eyed as I arrived at campus on move-in day. Growing up in New York, I just knew I had it all figured out. What could Columbia possibly surprise me with?

Then I met my roommate. He was a very nice guy who was more interested in altering his consciousness on a very frequent basis than Contemporary Civilization. As your Attorney General, that's all I have to say about that – except that he didn't last more than two months on campus.

After he moved out, I got a new roommate – this time, a sixteen year old computer whiz. And yes, there were computers back then. This poor student was a genius and a genuinely nice guy, but he had absolutely no social skills and no interest in anything other than computers. Before long, he was gone too, and I was one of the lucky few Columbia freshmen with a single.

I could not have chosen four more tumultuous years to be on a college campus than 1969-1973. The Viet Nam War, the rise of black consciousness, the woman's movement, the stirrings of gay pride, the feeling that anything was possible, that the world could be changed- all made my four College years exciting and memorable. Those years and those memories draw me back to Morningside Heights on a frequent basis- no matter where I physically am.

I was among a large group of students who felt strongly about the way we thought the world should be, and we weren't afraid to make our opinions heard. I did not take a final exam until my junior year at Columbia- we were on strike every time finals seemed to roll around- but we ran out of issues by that third year.

I also recall one day when we got together and decided to peacefully occupy one of the campus offices. We felt passionately about the need for a place where black students could gather and we went ahead and staged our sit-in. This became the black student's lounge in what was then Hartley Hall. The person who we had to negotiate with, and whose office we also occupied later, for some other reason was Dean Henry Coleman. In the ultimate display ofchutzpah I later asked Dean Coleman to write my law school recommendations. This being Columbia of course he agreed. He was a great, generous man. This College allowed an impetuous, testosterone laced youngster to express himself in ways that other institutions would have considered unacceptable. Not Columbia. This is why I love this place.

My time at Columbia was among the most meaningful and formative of my life. My memories of those years -- and the valuable lessons that perhaps I didn't fully realize I was learning at the time -- are still with me every day. And so they will be for you.

I want you to look around the crowd at your friends and fellow classmates.

It may feel to you as though these are your final days together. And it is true that most of you will never again be students together -- but I am here to tell you that this is just the beginning of a long, and I am confident, fruitful road that you will travel together.

I have spent thirty years in law enforcement, public service and the private practice of law. At every step along my professional path, I have encountered men and women of and from Columbia.

Those sitting around you this morning will populate and enrich your lives again and again and again.

You will find each other at the highest echelons of corporate America; in elective office; as judges, lawyers, doctors, directors of non-profits, engineers and teachers. You are now, and will always be, brothers and sisters in the Columbia family.

I welcome you into that family. Membership has its privileges. But what I really want to tell you about today are the family obligations and traditions.

Although I hope that a good number of you will continue your studies, I know that tomorrow will be the last day that some of you spend on an academic campus as a student.

You may never sit through another lecture or pull another all-nighter, fueled by nothing but caffeine and fear.

And I know that as you pack your bags, load them into a car or van and drive off toward whatever might come next, the last thing you want to think about is this new bond of responsibility. But that is what you must do. You are Columbia men and women.

I am talking specifically about the obligation to be a servant for the public good.

You may define the term “public servant” narrowly -- as an individual who chooses to run for office or work within the government.

But there is much more to it than that.

Public service is not a career path to be chosen or avoided; nor is it an extracurricular activity for which only some will find time for in their busy lives. I challenge each and every one of you today to recognize that you are all public servants – with contributions to make to your communities and to the Nation – regardless of your career choice. You must give the people the benefit of your education, the benefit of your expertise and serve them ably and faithfully in whatever you do. Whatever your job, find the time to do so. It is what Columbia people have always done.

From this day forward, you must do your part to improve the world around you.

Let us never forget that our country has only grown stronger -- the words of our constitution have only reached the full measure of their intent – because previous generations of Americans embraced the obligations that came with opportunity –

-- From George Washington, who risked his life on the battlefield for an untested experiment called liberty, to Abraham Lincoln, who risked the very life of our union in the name of freedom, to the Reverend Martin Luther King, who gave his life for the dream of equality.

You must embrace your responsibilities -- indeed welcome them -- with the same spirit of passion and dedication that you have shown in your successful academic careers.

You must dedicate a portion of your energy and compassion to those less fortunate.

You must give to the children in our cities who are starved for the kind of attention you can rather easily give. You must help the people who have lost their way but who can be helped by the direction you can easily share.

You can reach out to schools, youth centers, and churches, mosques and synagogues to spread your knowledge and your good works.

If you don't find yourself on the front lines of change, then help out those unsung leaders already hard at work in our community.

The people who truly deserve our respect – the people who work hard and play by the rules – who teach our children, who minister to us when we are ill, who go to work every day in search of a better life – these people are too often ignored. Make sure they are recognized and find ways to help them.

We should glory in their work and in the positive effect they have. We must find our heroes in the people who truly contribute to the betterment of our community. And we must each strive to emulate and support their heroic efforts however, and whenever, we can. A person who can and is willing to teach a child to read is infinitely more valuable to our society than someone with a good jump shot. Support that person, better yet- be that person.

Now, I have no doubt that over the course of the past few months as the end of your college career has drawn closer, you have had more than a few worried conversations with your fellow students, friends and family. George and Stephanie, and other parents are worried that Sydney and other grads are coming home.

You have wondered about your future prospects in an economy that seems to be leaving all Americans, no matter what color their collar, facing increasingly long odds and difficult times.

You may even be compelled to think that your class has gotten a raw deal. Let no one tell you that your path will be easy, but let me tell you that this difficult time for our country can and must be an opportunity for you.

Pursue that advanced degree. Train yourself in diplomacy, law, education, or foreign service.

Set your sites beyond the careers that seem to offer the greatest financial reward to the ones that will reward your soul -- and enrich our world. As graduates of this great institution your task is not primarily to do well but to do good.

I say without fear of hyperbole that sitting before me today, I see the future of our nation. I have seen the impact that a group of talented, energetic men and women with a great work ethic, training, and drive can leave on the world.

What excites me, though, is not your obvious abilities – but your possibilities – the prospect that you might devote yourselves to the task of building for yourselves a better country, a better world.

While I believe that my generation has done far more good than bad, the current state of the world proves that our work is incomplete.

I implore you not to let an ounce of your promise go unfulfilled.

I call upon you to aim higher and do better than my generation and those that came before.

You owe nothing less -- to yourselves, to your families, and to the society that has watched you, nurtured you and helped you flourish.

I urge you lead by example. I challenge you to show the world that a new generation of Americans is prepared to embrace the gifts -- and consequences -- of the great power you will inherit.

There is not one path to success in your career. For I believe that many of you will find success in all sorts of ways that we cannot even begin to envision today -- just like my 16 year old freshman year roommate -- who mastered computers and put himself on the front lines of an industry that most of us didn't even know existed.

But let me tell you something else from experience: even when you succeed, there are going to be some rough days. Your task then is not only to be true to yourself during those difficult times, it is also to continue to be loving and dedicated to your families and your communities as well.

I leave you with a few words written by Alfred Lord Tennyson, which are found handwritten in the diary of my most famous predecessor, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy.

Tennyson writes –

“Ah, what shall I be at fifty,
should nature keep me alive,
if I find the world so bitter
when I am but twenty-five?”

We may not know with clarity the tests that the future will bring. But graduates, as you dive head first toward tomorrow, I call upon you to never loosen nor lose your grip on hope. The optimism that seems to come naturally with youth need not be lost as the years pass. Hope is a precious but enduring thing.

Not a blind or passive hope, but rather, a confident hope; indeed a certain hope; that through our actions, big and small, positive change is not only possible, it is inevitable. This is what has driven the best from Columbia in years past and so it must guide you in the years coming.

The time is now. The responsibility is now yours. Good luck, and Godspeed.