

**Address at the 2004 Senior Class Convocation
by the Honorable William Jefferson Clinton, 42nd president of the United States
May 29, 2004, Schoellkopf Field, Cornell University
Transcribed by Cornell University News Service**

Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you, President Lehman.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the students who are here with me and David Jackson, Esther Tang, Russell Franklin, Ifunanya Maduka, I am honored to have the chance to share this day with you. I listened carefully to what Esther had to say, and I think you may have already heard the best speech of the day. But when she finished, I said, “Now, Esther, if you really had the same hairdo and wardrobe since the sixth grade, you were some spiffy sixth-grader in that suit, that’s all I can say.”

I want to congratulate the graduates and their immensely relieved parents. Someone asked me the other day how I felt about sending my memoirs off to the publisher. I said I feel the same way I did the day I sent Chelsea off to Stanford. I thought it was going to be all right, but I couldn’t be sure. So congratulations to the parents and the families today.

I also want to say a special word of appreciation to the faculty and staff of Cornell. It was interesting to me when I was writing the story of my life, how vividly I remembered so many of my teachers. And my editor insisted that I had to cut the sections that I had written about my professors in college, law school and my teachers in high school. He said, “No one will believe you remember this much about them, and no one else wants to read it all.” But I will tell you this, the older I get the more I appreciate people who give their lives to the educational enterprise. And so I thank those of you who have given your lives to teaching young people here at Cornell. Thank you very, very much.

I also bring you greetings and a warning from the junior senator from New York. You know the great thing about being an ex-president is you can say anything that’s on your mind. Of course, nobody pays any attention anymore, but you can say it. So I have been instructed to tell you that my views are my own and do not necessarily reflect anyone else’s in my family.

I also want to congratulate Cornell for selecting President Lehman as the first Cornellian ever to lead this university. I came to appreciate him before he came here, when he fought for diversity and affirmative action as the dean of the Michigan Law School, and I am very grateful for that. This school has produced some remarkable alumni: Pearl Buck, Bill Nye, E.B. White, former Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui, two particular friends of mine — Christopher Reeve and Toni Morrison, who once said I was the first black president. I was also fortunate to have a number of Cornell alumni in my administration, including my national security adviser, Sandy Berger, and Attorney General Janet Reno, both of whom performed with great distinction. And in 1993, I appointed Ruth Bader Ginsburg, class of she-said-I-couldn’t-say-which, to be the second woman on the United States Supreme Court. Two of your law school graduates today, Diana and Steven Berrent often do advance work for me. Ben Schwerin, a member of my staff in Harlem, is a graduate of Cornell. And I am going to embarrass her, but I have known young Kiva Iscol since she was virtually an infant, because her parents have been great friends of

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ours. I am grateful to Cornell. I have seen the good work you have done in every stage of life.

I also want to thank you particularly for establishing the first American medical school ever overseas, the Weill Cornell Medical College in Doha, Qatar. I have been there, and it's a remarkable place. Remarkable for its architectural beauty and for the boldness of its enterprise and remarkable because it is a bold, bold statement that there need not be a culture war, or a religious war, or an ethnic war defining the 21st century world.

When I was president, I cared a very great deal about science and technology and particularly about the space program, and so I thank the people of Cornell, including the students, who did so much to help us to examine the surface of Mars with the rovers Spirit and Opportunity. And I congratulate the work that has been done on even more mysterious, unknown dimensions of knowledge through your high-energy, high-intensity synchrotron source, which helped your researcher Rod MacKinnon win the Nobel Prize for chemistry in 2003. I think the 21st century will, in ways we do not yet fully imagine, be a century in which we merge information technology, biology and chemistry in ways that will bring unparalleled benefits and present new dangers.

I know that this class has not been without its tragedies. I know you lost a star athlete and remarkable student when George Boiardi perished on the lacrosse field in March, and my prayers are with his family today; this must be a difficult day for them. I know you were touched by the events of September the 11th, and many of you reached out to people in need after that to try to do what you could. I know that two Cornell alumni, Army Captain George Wood, Class of '93, and Marine Captain Richard Gannon, Class of '95, lost their lives in Iraq. And the world is still shocked and saddened by what happened to one of your former students, Nick Berg, whose only mission in Iraq was to help people build a better future. I salute their courage, their service and their sacrifice.

It is common for commencement or convocation speakers to challenge graduating classes. It is common for graduating classes to listen respectfully and eagerly await the close of the speech, so you can get on with your business here. But I do want to challenge you today. I want to challenge you to redeem the service and sacrifice of the Cornell alumni who have gone before you and particularly of all those who have paid a price from September 11, 2001, to the present day, by doing your part to continue the eternal mission of American democracy, which our founders articulated in these words. When we began as a nation, they said, "We pledge our lives, our fortunes, our sacred honor to form a more perfect union." It was a charge both humble and bold. Humble because they recognized our union would never be perfect. People are flawed; they don't have perfect intelligence; they don't have perfect capacities. But they knew it could always be more perfect, and therefore it was bold. It embodied the idea of progress. At many points along America's way from our beginning, we have been called upon as a people to define, defend and expand that more perfect union.

In the beginning, as soon as George Washington left office, we realized that we had a constitution, but nobody knew quite what it meant. We didn't have a national economic system until Alexander

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Hamilton assumed the debts of all the colonies and said we would have a uniform currency. We didn't have a national legal system until Chief Justice John Marshall in the great case Marbury versus Madison said the Supreme Court would be the final arbiter of all legal questions. And since then we have all lived with that, even disgruntled democrats in 2000. Because if we were going to have a more perfect union, we had to have a national legal and economic system.

Cornell was founded at the end of the Civil War. The second great test for our union. When we had a choice to make we could have chosen division and slavery, and instead we chose to end slavery and maintain the union. We had a choice to make over a hundred years ago when we ceased to be primarily an agricultural society and became an industrial one, dominated by large corporations. When Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson and later Franklin Roosevelt said that we had to have a government that could preserve competition, promote social justice and protect our environmental resources from plunder. We had a choice to make after World War II, when for the first time the United States became involved in a permanent way around the world to stand against the spread of communism and for the cause of freedom. When I was your age, we had a choice to make about civil rights and women's rights. Were we going to expand the union to live up to what our founders said — that we are all created equal? And since then we have faced that challenge again in terms of how we deal with immigrants and gays. Always being called upon to redefine, to defend, to expand the union.

I would argue to all of you that we are in a new turning point of history for our nation and the world. At the end of the Cold War with the emergence of a global information economy, for the first time in all human history we have the opportunity to bring people together across the planet in common cause for common good. We live in an age of interdependence, but that can be good or bad. It simply means that we cannot escape each other. Trade and travel are good, terrorism is bad, they are two sides of the same coin. The terrorists of 9/11 used easy travel, easy immigration, easy access to information and technology to kill 3,000 people from 70 countries in the United States. They used the forces of interdependence. We have the Human Genome Project, an international project decoding the mysteries of life. We have an international space station put up with the best minds from across the world. We also have a global AIDS epidemic. We have global warming. They, too, reflect our interdependence. I believe the great mission of the 21st century world is to build up the positive forces of interdependence and beat back the negative ones. To move from mere interdependence to a global community, based on shared benefits, shared responsibilities and shared values. That will require America to ask and answer some very large questions, and I would argue that we've been debating them now for some years. If the industrial era is over, the era of big bureaucracies is over, what is the role of government in our lives? Is government really the problem as we have been told or instead should government still be there to give everybody an equal chance and to help those who through no fault of their own have been left behind, to give people the tools and conditions to make the most of their own lives? At this unique moment of economic strength for our country, should we just take all we can now or should we build a world where

the half of the people that don't feel any benefits from globalization have their chance too? How should we respond to terror? With stronger attacks, stronger defenses, or should we also try to make a world with more friends and fewer terrorists? What should our attitude be toward our own racial and religious and ethnic diversity? Is it bound to make us more fractured or could it make us even stronger?

I would argue to you that most of the categories of political thinking which have dominated America since the end of World War II are completely inadequate to answer these questions. This is a time when we need to, in President Lincoln's words, "Think anew, so that we can act anew." You know what I believe from what I said. I believe the role of government should be to create the conditions and give people the tools — all people — to make the most of their own lives. I believe we should do more to fight terror. I believe we should do more on homeland defense. I think we should check more than 5 percent of the containers that come into our ports and airports for chemical and biological and small-scale nuclear weapons. I think we should spend more money with the Russians and others to try to contain the biological and chemical stocks around the world that could get into the wrong hands.

But if you live in a world where you cannot kill, occupy or imprison all your actual or potential adversaries, then you have to make a deal. You have to try to build a world with more friends and fewer terrorists. That is the purpose of politics, to bring people together when they cannot control each other and they must work together.

It is easy to say and hard to do. Half the world is living on less than \$2 a day. A billion people live on less than a dollar a day. A billion people go to bed hungry every night. A billion and a half people never get a single clean glass of water in their lives. Ten million children die every year of completely preventable childhood diseases. One in four of all the people who will perish on Earth this year will die of AIDS, TB, malaria and infections related to diarrhea. Most of them are little children who never got a single clean glass of water in their lives.

Now, if you solve all these problems, does it mean there will be no terrorists? No. But it means there will be fewer people who'll have a reason to hate, to resent, to feel left out and left behind. A hundred and thirty million children never go to school at all. We're sitting here at Cornell celebrating the fact that students from all over the world got great educations in a world in which 130 million kids never darken a schoolhouse door, anywhere. It would cost us a tiny fraction of what we are spending on defense and homeland defense to put every kid in this world in school for six years, and we ought to do it.

So I believe we need a strategy for terror and a strategy for building more friends and fewer terrorists; and I also believe that we should try to build the institutions of international cooperation.

There is an honest and intellectually respectable disagreement in America today about whether we should use this moment of unrivaled military, economic and political superiority to go out and get rid of the bad guys in the world, so that when there are other people who achieve parity with us we'll live in a

better world or whether instead we should use this moment to build better frameworks of partnership so we'll be more likely to cooperate and when we are no longer the only military, political and economic superpower in the world, we'll be treated in a way we'd like to be treated. It is an honest disagreement.

A great writer, Robert Kaplan, who has chronicled in breathtakingly moving terms some of the great social developments of the world, has written a book called *Warrior Politics*, in which he argues essentially for unilateral foreign policy for America. He says we have never been an imperialist country, we have no territorial ambitions, we should go around getting rid of the bad guys and stopping bad things all over the world, just as happened in Iraq. That's his theory, and he, as I said, is one of the most astute observers of the world's problems.

The problem with that is that most of the world's problems are not well suited to unilateral solutions. You can tear down a building alone but you normally need some help to build one, and most of the world's problems work better or respond better to cooperative solutions. But when you see the debate today in America over the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the Antiballistic Missile Treaty, the International Criminal Court, the Climate Change Treaty, all these things, you should understand that we are having a debate in our country about something that will be very, very important to the future of every young person in this audience.

It's obvious what side I'm on. I believe we should cooperate whenever we can and act alone when we're forced to. Others believe we should act alone whenever we can and cooperate when that's all that works. I believe, but I say again, their view has a lot of adherence and respectable intellectual support. I just think it's wrong, because again I will say, if you look all over the world, if you look at the Middle East, if you look at Northern Ireland, if you look at the Balkans, if you look at the tribal wars in Africa, if you look in every place there's a problem rooted in religious, racial, ethnic or tribal difference, aggravated in some places by the presence of powerful conventional or unconventional weapons, you find that almost always the only sensible solution is a cooperative one across the lines that divide.

That brings me to the final point I wish to make. The great power of the United States through history has not been in our weapons, but in the power of our example and the hope we have held out to others. When I began this day, I started asking about where all the students came from, what were their native countries. Miss Maduka here, she comes from Nigeria. I doubt if Esther was really found outside a Chinese restaurant. I see Muslims in the audience, I see Jews in the audience, I see Christians in the audience. I wouldn't be surprised if there aren't Confucians and Buddhists and Bahais here.

After 9/11, Hillary and I went to a grade school in lower Manhattan. It had to relocate because their building was destroyed. There were 600 kids in that grade school, only 600; they were from eighty different national and ethnic groups, eighty. In one little school in New York City. That is where the world ought to go. Children have to be taught how to hate.

Throughout all of history, we have moved in a painful way, beginning over 100,000 years ago when our forebearers first stood up on the African savannah. We have moved from isolation to interdepen-

dence to cooperation. The whole world of world history can be seen in part as the conflict that is generated when people of different families, clans, tribes and nations start bumping up against one another. And first they are afraid of people who are different from them, then they see that they're not so different from them, then they get interested in working together. But there are always vested interests that maintain their power, their wealth, their position by promoting hatred and division. And so people fight until they get tired of fighting, and then they start working together.

Throughout all of history that has happened, and, thank God, always before we have chosen cooperation over conflict before we destroyed each other. We nearly got it wrong in the 20th century, through two world wars, the dropping of atomic weapons, the long Cold War with its prospect of annihilation.

That's what's going on here now. We are thrown into a world of complete global interdependence, but only half the people are benefiting from it. People all over the world are trying to figure out how to hold on to their religious, their ethnic, their racial, their tribal characteristics that make them proud and give them identity without having to denigrate, dehumanize somebody who's different. It is in some ways the last great struggle for humanity on this planet. When we finally get it together, we can start looking for life in other solar systems. You laugh about it, but think about it.

Finally we are being called upon to recognize what we have in common in this beautiful, cold, often rainy place with people in arid, hot Saharan deserts half a world away, and we know in fact we do. When the human genome was sequenced, to me the most interesting finding was that all people are over 99.9 percent the same genetically and that racial groups have more in common with each other as groups than individuals within the groups do with one another, that the genetic differences within groups are greater than the profile from group to group.

And so I leave you with that. You don't have to agree with me about this, but you do have to have your own theory about the world in which you live, because we are at another turning point and another time to choose. I hope we will choose to build a more perfect union, and I hope we will decide that that mission, that eternal mission of our country, is now a global one. One we cannot reach alone. I believe that the 21st century will be the most exciting, interesting time in all of human history, if we do what we have always done before at every turning point in history. If we defend, define and expand the more perfect union. If we recognize that our differences make life interesting, but our common humanity is far, far, far more important.

Thank you, good luck and God bless you.