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2018 Baccalaureate Address

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Remarks to the Class of 2018, Baccalaureate Ceremony
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100th Commencement
May 19, 2018

I first must extend my deepest gratitude for granting me the honor to address the graduating Class of 2018. Just like you, this will be my next to last official act as a member of the Connecticut College community.

Four years ago, at about the time you, the students, were beginning to take your first set of courses at Connecticut College, I started to work on a new book. The idea for the new book had been germinating in my mind for more than 30 years. The question I sought to address was: Why have certain states in the Americas, and by that I mean, North, Central and South America, managed to create stable and relatively effective democratic regimes while others have not?

Why this deep interest in democracies?

I spent the first 19 years of my life living in a highly unstable, undemocratic, political system. Just a few months after I was born in a small province in northern Argentina, a populist military leader was elected president. He was overthrown in 1955, and replaced by a military dictatorship. New elections were held in 1958, but four years later the military once again toppled the elected government. During that interim period, failed military coups, demonstrations and strikes became the norm. In 1966, a year after I had left my birth country, the Argentine military once again decided to become an active political participant. Several military coups followed until 1982, when the military had no choice but to accept that it lacked the know-how and legitimacy to rule.

Argentina's experience was not unique. Many other Latin American states endured similar political misfortunes. But as the perceived threat of communism abated in the 1980s, democracy in Latin America underwent a revival.

I am not going to explain what generated the resurgence of democratic governments throughout Latin America. My reasons for giving you a tightly summarized script are threefold. First, the specter of living at my late age under a non-democratic regime terrifies me. Though on more than one occasion I facetiously made fun in my classes about how much I enjoyed witnessing the spectacle provided by military coups, I rarely spoke about how I felt about my inability to voice my views freely; the lack of access to multiple sources of information; the risk of being arrested simply for standing alone at a street corner at 2 a.m. waiting for a bus; the fear that one day one of my friends who had openly voiced anti-status quo opinions might disappear or be killed; and finally, the realization one day that such fear had become a reality to one of my cousins. Memories of 19 years of political uncertainty and oppression remain deeply embedded in my memory.

Second, the signs emanating from various corners of the world, including the United States, trouble me, and they should alarm you. I am concerned not just because leaders with authoritarian personalities backed by populist movements are emerging everywhere, but also because members of the millennial generation have been steadily losing their trust in democracies.

In the 1920s, only a very small number of states qualified as a democracy. By 2012 that number had increased to 117. But between the years 2005 and 2013, more countries experienced a decline in political rights and civil liberties than an increase. Equally disturbing are the figures that represent the percentage of millennials in developed democracies who actually support democracy. In the United States the percentage of millennials who believe it is “essential to live in a democracy” is only 30 percent. Yes, 30 percent, you heard me right. In Australia, Great Britain, the Netherlands and New Zealand, four countries which are ranked amongst the 16 most developed democracies in the world, the percentage of those who believe it is essential to live in a democracy is 40 percent or slightly lower.

The numbers do not get any better when the analysis focuses on those who believe that it is preferable to have a “strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections.” Though the percentages are still relatively low, sadly they have increased in the United States and Germany, as well as in Mexico, Argentina, Peru and Uruguay—four Latin American countries that just a few decades ago seemed to have finally embraced democracy.

What I have just said brings me to my third reason. There is no such thing as an ideal political regime—our human imperfections prevent us from creating one. But amongst imperfect political regimes, democracy is the least flawed.

Democracies do not evolve naturally. Democracies are not planned. And democracies carry within themselves the seeds of their own destruction.

The natural tendency of individuals who gain political power is to protect it, retain it as long as possible, and enlarge it if the opportunity arises. Throughout history, democracies have depended on well-designed constitutions to prevent political leaders from being overtaken by their own worst instincts. But regardless of how strong and well-constructed the constitutions may seem to be, democracies cannot survive if you, who will be amongst the principal creators of the world to come, raise your hands in despair and simply say: “We give up. Our leaders are corrupt and there is little we can do.”

As you prepare to leave Connecticut College and design your own future, I will ask you to keep in mind four things.

First, you cannot afford to be overtaken by rhetoric founded on unproven evidence, nor by ideas voiced by individuals who are unwilling and unprepared to be involved in constructive discourse. In the past five decades this country has experienced the very high costs of accepting the words of leaders who purposely spread falsehoods. I experienced that lie firsthand when I was sent to Vietnam in 1969. By now we know that leaders of the Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon

administrations knew from early on that such war was unwinnable, and yet in order to protect their political future or that of their political party, those same leaders willingly sacrificed the lives of over 50,000 Americans and of millions of Vietnamese. And let us not forget what happened in Iraq. The leaders in Washington sought to convince the American people that the threat posed by Iraq on the U.S. was real and imminent. It was neither, and yet the American people refused to listen to those who knew that it was neither real nor imminent. Their muddying of the truth resulted in the death of thousands of Iraqis and Americans, and did not help Iraq become the democracy U.S. leaders claimed they would build. These wars and other major missteps the U.S. and other countries have taken inform us that before we act in matters of extraordinary significance we must know the facts. You cannot just rely on the beliefs of those who share your beliefs, and you cannot just rely on what you think you know. You must make sure that what you think is a fact actually is a fact.

Second, listen and place yourselves in the shoes of those with whom you vehemently disagree. I am not going to claim that by doing so you will change your mind or you will convince them to alter their views, but at minimum you must try to understand their rationale. As you try to engage in this type of endeavor, which I am the first to acknowledge is a very difficult one, you must always keep your ego in check. As someone who, through the years, has engaged in multiple arguments, the one thing that I have learned is that both my adversaries and I were always so determined to win the argument that too often we failed to recognize that what the other had been contending made a great deal of sense.

Third, you cannot remain quiet and retreat to your own little corner of the world in order to avoid the task of facing the unpleasant realities that surround you. If you do, history tells us that you will eventually regret it, because the liberties that you are presently experiencing will not continue to exist.

And finally, I ask you not to forget that it was at Connecticut College where you moved from being teenagers to adults who now possess the capacity to march into the world well prepared not only to develop the professional life of your choice, but also to fulfill your responsibilities as members of a flawed democracy.

I ask you to please face the challenges created by the political, economic and social environment of the “real” world you will enter. I ask you to keep in mind that it was here at Connecticut College where your voices, sometimes very angry voices, developed meaning, and that if you remain silent as you start the next phase of your life, you will be renouncing your status as a thinking being with a conscience. You would be forsaking who you have become.

Don't do that. Be brave and don't flinch even when the challenges ahead of you seem insurmountable. The world needs individuals who, while struggling to be successful in their chosen professions, will not forget for a single moment that they are part of a very large and highly complex human community, which lives in an endangered natural environment. For such a community to survive and prosper, young people like you must attend to both the human and natural elements intelligently and with deep care.

Final words. Keep in mind, that in no small measure you owe your education to those who preceded you for the past century and who through the years have helped Connecticut College to prosper. Please make sure that you help generations to come enjoy the quality education you have received here. Their support, voices and courage will also play vital roles in the education of the generations who will follow them.

But for now, before you go into the world to tackle the many challenges you will encounter, let me just say: Congratulations!