

Barack Obama

Commencement Address at Knox College

Delivered 4 June 2005



AUTHENTICITY CERTIFIED: Text version below transcribed directly from audio

Good morning President Taylor, Board of Trustees, faculty, parents, family, friends, the community of Galesburg, the class of 1955 -- which I understand was out partying last night, and yet still showed up here on time -- and most of all, the Class of 2005. Congratulations on your graduation, and thank you -- thank you for the honor of allowing me to be a part of it. Thank you also, Mr. President, for this honorary degree. It was only a couple of years ago that I stopped paying my student loans in law school. Had I known it was this easy, I would have ran [sic] for the United States Senate earlier.

You know, it has been about six months now since you sent me to Washington as your United States Senator. I recognize that not all of you voted for me, so for those of you muttering under your breath "I didn't send you anywhere," that's ok too. Maybe we'll hold -- What do you call it? -- a little Pumphandle after the ceremony. Change your mind for the next time.

It has been a fascinating journey thus far. Each time I walk onto the Senate floor, I'm reminded of the history, for good and for ill, that has been made there. But there have been a few surreal moments.

For example, I remember the day before I was sworn in, myself and my staff, we decided to hold a press conference in our office. Now, keep in mind that I am ranked 99th in seniority. I was proud that I wasn't ranked dead last until I found out that it's just because Illinois is bigger than Colorado. So I'm 99th in seniority, and all the reporters are crammed into the tiny transition office that I have, which is right next to the janitor's closet in the basement of the Dirksen Office Building. It's my first day in the building, I have not taken a single vote, I have not introduced one bill, had not even sat down in my desk, and this very earnest reporter raises his hand and says:

"Senator Obama, what is your place in history?"

I did what you just did, which is laugh out loud. I said, "place in history?" I thought he was kidding. At that point, I wasn't even sure the other Senators would save a place for me at the cool kids' table.

But as I was thinking about the words to share with this class, about what's next, about what's possible, and what opportunities lay ahead, I actually think it's not a bad question for you, the class of 2005, to ask yourselves: What will be your place in history?

In other eras, across distant lands, this question could be answered with relative ease and certainty. As a servant in Rome, you knew you'd spend your life forced to build somebody else's Empire. As a peasant in 11th Century China, you knew that no matter how hard you worked, the local warlord might come and take everything you had -- and you also knew that famine might come knocking at the door. As a subject of King George, you knew that your freedom of worship and your freedom to speak and to build your own life would be ultimately limited by the throne.

And then America happened.

A place where destiny was not a destination, but a journey to be shared and shaped and remade by people who had the gall, the temerity to believe that, against all odds, they could form "a more perfect union" on this new frontier.

And as people around the world began to hear the tale of the lowly colonists who overthrew an empire for the sake of an idea, they started to come. Across oceans and the ages, they settled in Boston and Charleston, Chicago and St. Louis, Kalamazoo and Galesburg, to try and build their own American Dream. This collective dream moved forward imperfectly -- it was scarred by our treatment of native peoples, betrayed by slavery, clouded by the subjugation of women, shaken by war and depression. And yet, brick by brick, rail by rail, calloused hand by calloused hand, people kept dreaming, and building, and working, and marching, and petitioning their government, until they made America a land where the question of our place in history is not answered for us. It's answered by us.

Have we failed at times? Absolutely. Will you occasionally fail when you embark on your own American journey? You surely will. But the test is not perfection. The true test of the American ideal is whether we're able to recognize our failings and then rise together to meet the challenges of our time. Whether we allow ourselves to be shaped by events and history, or whether we act to shape them. Whether chance of birth or circumstance decides life's big winners and losers, or whether we build a community where, at the very least, everyone has a chance to work hard, get ahead, and reach their dreams.

We have faced this choice before.

At the end of the Civil War, when farmers and their families began moving into the cities to work in the big factories that were sprouting up all across America, we had to decide: Do we do nothing and allow captains of industry and robber barons to run roughshod over the economy and workers by competing to see who can pay the lowest wages at the worst working conditions? Or do we try to make the system work by setting up basic rules for the market, instituting the first public schools, busting up monopolies, letting workers organize into unions?

We chose to act, and we rose together.

When the irrational exuberance of the Roaring Twenties came crashing down with the stock market, we had to decide: do we follow the call of leaders who would do nothing, or the call of a leader who, perhaps because of his physical paralysis, refused to accept political paralysis?

We chose to act -- regulating the market, putting people back to work, expanding bargaining rights to include health care and a secure retirement -- and together we rose.

When World War II required the most massive home front mobilization in history and we needed every single American to lend a hand, we had to decide: Do we listen to skeptics who told us it wasn't possible to produce that many tanks and planes? Or, did we build Roosevelt's Arsenal for Democracy and grow our economy even further by providing our returning heroes with a chance to go to college and own their own home?

Again, we chose to act, and again, we rose together.

Today, at the beginning of this young century, we have to decide again. But this time, it is your turn to choose.

Here in Galesburg, you know what this new challenge is. You've seen it. All of you, your first year in college saw what happened at 9/11. It's already been noted, the degree to which your lives will be intertwined with the war on terrorism that currently is taking place. But what you've also seen, perhaps not as spectacularly, is the fact that when you drive by the old Maytag plant around lunchtime, no one walks out anymore.

I saw it during the campaign when I met union guys who worked at the plant for 20, 30 years and now wonder what they're gonna do at the age of 55 without a pension or health care; when I met the man who's son needed a new liver but because he'd been laid off, didn't know if he could afford to provide his child the care that he needed.

It's as if someone changed the rules in the middle of the game and no wonder -- no one bothered to tell these folks. And, in reality, the rules have changed.

It started with technology and automation that rendered entire occupations obsolete. When was the last time anybody here stood in line for the bank teller instead of going to the ATM, or talked to a switchboard operator? Then it continued when companies like Maytag were able to pick up and move their factories to some under developed country where workers were a lot cheaper than they are in the United States.

As Tom Friedman points out in his new book, *The World Is Flat*, over the last decade or so, these forces -- technology and globalization -- have combined like never before. So that while most of us have been paying attention to how much easier technology has made our own lives -- sending e-mails back and forth on our blackberries, surfing the Web on our cell phones, instant messaging with friends across the world -- a quiet revolution has been breaking down barriers and connecting the world's economies. Now business not only has the ability to move jobs wherever there's a factory, but wherever there's an internet connection.

Countries like India and China realized this. They understand that they no longer need to be just a source of cheap labor or cheap exports. They can compete with us on a global scale. The one resource they needed were skilled, educated workers. So they started schooling their kids earlier, longer, with a greater emphasis on math and science and technology, until their most talented students realized they don't have to come to America to have a decent life -- they can stay right where they are.

The result? China is graduating four times the number of engineers that the United States is graduating. Not only are those Maytag employees competing with Chinese and Indian and Indonesian and Mexican workers, you are too. Today, accounting firms are e-mailing your tax returns to workers in India who will figure them out and send them back to you as fast as any worker in Illinois or Indiana could.

When you lose your luggage in Boston at an airport, tracking it down may involve a call to an agent in Bangalore, who will find it by making a phone call to Baltimore. Even the Associated Press has outsourced some of their jobs to writers all over the world who can send in a story at a click of a mouse.

As Prime Minister Tony Blair has said, in this new economy, "Talent is the 21st century wealth." If you've got the skills, you've got the education, and you have the opportunity to upgrade and improve both, you'll be able to compete and win anywhere. If not, the fall will be further and harder than it ever was before.

So what do we do about this? How does America find its way in this new, global economy? What will our place in history be?

Like so much of the American story, once again, we face a choice. Once again, there are those who believe that there isn't much we can do about this as a nation. That the best idea is to give everyone one big refund on their government -- divvy it up by individual portions, in the form of tax breaks, hand it out, and encourage everyone to use their share to go buy their own health care, their own retirement plan, their own child care, their own education, and so on.

In Washington, they call this the Ownership Society. But in our past there has been another term for it -- Social Darwinism -- every man or woman for him or herself. It's a tempting idea, because it doesn't require much thought or ingenuity. It allows us to say that those whose health care or tuition may rise faster than they can afford -- tough luck. It allows us to say to the Maytag workers who have lost their job -- life isn't fair. It lets us say to the child who was born into poverty -- pull yourself up by your bootstraps. And it is especially tempting because each of us believes we will always be the winner in life's lottery, that we're the one who will be the next Donald Trump, or at least we won't be the chump who Donald Trump says: "You're fired!"

But there is a problem. It won't work. It ignores our history. It ignores the fact that it's been government research and investment that made the railways possible and the internet possible. It's been the creation of a massive middle class, through decent wages and benefits and public schools that allowed us all to prosper. Our economic dependence depended on individual initiative. It depended on a belief in the free market; but it has also depended on our sense of mutual regard for each other, the idea that everybody has a stake in the country, that we're all in it together and everybody's got a shot at opportunity. That's what's produced our unrivaled political stability.

And so if we do nothing in the face of globalization, more people will continue to lose their health care. Fewer kids will be able to afford the diploma you're about to receive.

More companies like United Airlines won't be able to provide pensions for their employees. And those Maytag workers will be joined in the unemployment line by any worker whose skills can be bought and sold on the global market.

So today I'm here to tell you what most of you already know. This is not us -- the option that I just mentioned. Doing nothing. It's not how our story ends -- not in this country. America is a land of big dreamers and big hopes.

It is this hope that has sustained us through revolution and civil war, depression and world war, a struggle for civil and social rights and the brink of nuclear crisis. And it is because our dreamers dreamed that we have emerged from each challenge more united, more prosperous, and more admired than before.

So let's dream. Instead of doing nothing or simply defending 20th century solutions, let's imagine together what we could do to give every American a fighting chance in the 21st century.

What if we prepared every child in America with the education and skills they need to compete in the new economy? If we made sure that college was affordable for everyone who wanted to go? If we walked up to those Maytag workers and we said "Your old job is not coming back, but a new job will be there because we're going to seriously retrain you and there's life-long education that's waiting for you -- the sorts of opportunities that Knox has created with the Strong Futures scholarship program.

What if no matter where you worked or how many times you switched jobs, you had health care and a pension that stayed with you always, so you all had the flexibility to move to a better job or start a new business? What if instead of cutting budgets for research and development and science, we fueled the genius and the innovation that will lead to the new jobs and new industries of the future?

Right now, all across America, there are amazing discoveries being made. If we supported these discoveries on a national level, if we committed ourselves to investing in these possibilities, just imagine what it could do for a town like Galesburg. Ten or twenty years down the road, that old Maytag plant could re-open its doors as an Ethanol refinery that turned corn into fuel. Down the street, a biotechnology research lab could open up on the cusp of discovering a cure for cancer. And across the way, a new auto company could be busy churning out electric cars. The new jobs created would be filled by American workers trained with new skills and a world-class education.

All of that is possible but none of it will come easy. Every one of us is going to have to work more, read more, train more, think more. We will have to slough off some bad habits -- like driving gas guzzlers that weaken our economy and feed our enemies abroad. Our children will have to turn off the TV set once in a while and put away the video games and start hitting the books. We'll have to reform institutions, like our public schools, that were designed for an earlier time. Republicans will have to recognize our collective responsibilities, even as Democrats recognize that we have to do more than just defend old programs.

It won't be easy, but it can be done. It can be our future. We have the talent and the resources and brainpower. But now we need the political will. We need a national commitment.

And we need each of you.

Now, no one can force you to meet these challenges. If you want, it will be pretty easy for you to leave here today and not give another thought to towns like Galesburg and the challenges they face. There is no community service requirement in the real world; no one is forcing you to care.

You can take your diploma, walk off this stage, and go chasing after the big house, and the nice suits, and all the other things that our money culture says that you should want, that you should aspire to, that you can buy.

But I hope you don't walk away from the challenge. Focusing your life solely on making a buck shows a certain poverty of ambition. It asks too little of yourself. You need to take up the challenges that we face as a nation and make them your own. Not because you have a debt to those who helped you get here, although you do have that debt. Not because you have an obligation to those who are less fortunate than you, although I do think you do have that obligation. It's primarily because you have an obligation to yourself. Because individual salvation has always depended on collective salvation. Because it's only when you hitch your wagon to something larger than yourself that you realize your true potential.

And I know that all of you are wondering how you'll do this, the challenges seem so big. They seem so difficult for one person to make a difference.

But we know it can be done. Because where you're sitting, in this very place, in this town, it's happened before.

Nearly two centuries ago, before civil rights, before voting rights, before Abraham Lincoln, before the Civil War, before all of that, America was stained by the sin of slavery. In the sweltering heat of southern plantations, men and women who looked like me could not escape the life of pain and servitude in which they were sold. And yet, year after year, as this moral cancer ate away at the American ideals of liberty and equality, the nation was silent.

But its people didn't stay silent for long.

One by one, abolitionists emerged to tell their fellow Americans that this would not be our place in history -- that this was not the America that had captured the imagination of the world.

This resistance that they met was fierce, and some paid with their lives. But they would not be deterred, and they soon spread out across the country to fight for their cause. One man from New York went west, all the way to the prairies of Illinois to start a colony.

And here in Galesburg, freedom found a home.

Here in Galesburg, the main depot for the Underground Railroad in Illinois, escaped slaves could roam freely on the streets and take shelter in people's homes. And when their masters or the police would come for them, the people of this town would help them escape north, some literally carrying them in their arms to freedom.

Think about the risks that involved. If they were caught abetting a fugitive, you could've been jailed or lynched. It would have been simple for these townspeople to turn the other way; to go live their lives in a private peace.

And yet, they didn't do that. Why?

Because they knew that we were all Americans; that we were all brothers and sisters; the same reason that a century later, young men and women your age would take Freedom Rides down south, to work for the Civil Rights movement. The same reason that black women would walk instead of ride a bus after a long day of doing somebody else's laundry and cleaning somebody else's kitchen. Because they were marching for freedom.

Today, on this day of possibility, we stand in the shadow of a lanky, raw-boned man with little formal education who once took the stage at Old Main and told the nation that if anyone did not believe the American principles of freedom and equality, that those principles were timeless and all-inclusive, they should go rip that page out of the Declaration of Independence.

My hope for all of you is that as you leave here today, you decide to keep these principles alive in your own life and in the life of this country. You will be tested. You won't always succeed. But know that you have it within your power to try. That generations who have come before you faced these same fears and uncertainties in their own time. And that through our collective labor, and through God's providence, and our willingness to shoulder each other's burdens, America will continue on its precious journey towards that distant horizon, and a better day.

Thank you so much class of 2005, and congratulations on your graduation. Thank you.