

Hon. Robert H. Strauss, speaker
Introduction by SMU President R. Gerald Turner
SMU Commencement, May 16, 1998

Peace, trade and cultural understanding. One of Dallas's most honored citizens, the Honorable Robert S. Strauss, has served as U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union, the last U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union and the first U.S. Ambassador to the Russian federation. He earned the Presidential Medal of Freedom for his contributions to Middle East peace negotiations. He was a special trade representative during the formation of the landmark U.S. trade policy. He founded one of the leading international law firms, Akin, Gump, Strauss, Hauer & Feld, and he shared his insight as a visiting lecturer both at UT Austin and here at SMU. It's a distinct pleasure to have with us the Honorable Robert S. Strauss, ambassador and citizen extraordinary. Mr. Strauss. . .

President Turner, distinguished members of the faculty, members of the graduating class, their families and their friends, let me begin today by congratulating each of the graduates. Congratulating them on this marvelous occasion. And let me also congratulate this splendid institution and its administrative officers and faculty, headed by your remarkable president, Gerald Turner. SMU adds a dimension to the quality of life of this area, unmatched in my judgment, by any other institution in this area, and has done so for years. And so I congratulate you on your graduation and particularly upon your graduation from Southern Methodist University. And on a very personal note, I thank you for permitting me to participate. As I begin today I want you to understand and appreciate one thing and that is that you are being addressed by an extremely popular commencement speaker. Not because of the quality of the remarks I have delivered over the years at commencement addresses, but because I learned many years ago that the one single thing, the one single thing a commencement class has absolutely no interest in on commencement day is the commencement address. Accordingly, once it became known around the country, in academic circles, that Bob Strauss was a 10-minute commencement speaker, you have no idea what it did for my popularity. You know I predicted that. I must also protect my reputation for honesty and candor by telling you that I have myself graduated several times. I have also sat through graduations with my children, grandchildren and others, as well as

having delivered a number of commencement addresses. And I must admit to you that for the life of me I cannot recall a single thing I heard uttered on any one of those occasions. Now former Senator Howard Baker and I were talking yesterday on the phone about each of us giving commencement speeches and we agreed on that one point. That said, you can now relax and begin to worry about the future, not the present. After all, the present has only nine and one-half minutes to go. As to the future, the simple truth is that you have been studying for the past many years, studying history, studying history in one form or another. And now instead of studying it, you will begin to make it. And believe me, you can believe me, it's more exciting making it even than studying it. You are not only moving into a world that was unknown when I was a member of a graduating class, but I suspect it's not an overstatement to say to you that you are entering a world that is a great deal different from the world you could have possibly anticipated finding on graduation day as recently as when you entered college just a very few years ago. Now change, while wonderful, very wonderful, is not kind to those who cannot adapt. That has been the case throughout history and never forget it. Never forget it in your personal or in your business life. Today is not only the change itself, but the incredible rapidity of that change and its global scale which affects our lives so profoundly. When I grew up in Stamford, Texas, about 200 miles west of here, in a town of about 3,000, our whole lives seemed to depend upon whether it rained within a 30-mile radius of that square in that small west Texas town. If the rains came in the spring and again in the summer, the cotton grew and the people in that community struggled, but managed to live decently. And when it didn't rain, there was no money, no money, and we all suffered. Our whole lives, year after year after year, revolved around the rains that fell or did not fall around the square in Stamford, Texas. Today, whether we live around the square in Stamford, or in Dallas or in New York or in London, we are all citizens of a globalized society and decisions being made in Beijing, London, Moscow and elsewhere around the world, within seconds after being made, affect our lives far more dramatically and far more directly than did the rain that either fell or did not fall in west Texas in the '30s. Yes, today we truly are citizens of a globalized society and you're entering it. We speak of global leadership for our country and we take pride in being the leader of the free world. But we cannot have it on the cheap. You cannot have it if our citizens, and particularly our young citizens, such as yourselves, become cynical about our government at home or our role in the international community in the next century. The answer to a political process that leaves us all more than a little cynical is certainly not more cynicism. The answer is more personal involvement by our citizens in that process. Despite the daily headlines about the scandals in Washington, in both executive and legislative branches, Democrats and Republicans alike in varying degrees

from time to time, as individuals and as a nation, we must remain engaged in the public policy process — a nation committed to and confident of its power to courageously lead this world. And your generation particularly must remain engaged to help transform the romantic commitment, just romantic commitment, which a different generation of students and leaders made to democracy and justice in the '60s. You must lead it into a more hard-headed and more pragmatic commitment and engagement for the 21st century. Of course it is of the highest priority that we remain militarily strong, the very highest priority that we remain militarily strong. But trident missiles alone can't solve our massive problems with global warming or world hunger or many other things, and they surely can't help bring order to the vast financial markets around the world that we rely on each day to help preserve prosperity at home. Our graduates of today must also be involved, be participants in seeing that our nation remains committed to community values, community values, and that our institutions reach people where they live, reach people in our neighborhoods, in our schools, our churches and synagogues. We in the U.S., and particularly our younger citizens, must not only espouse and further the concept of community values in our country, we should also remain committed to democracy, human rights and open markets in this globalized world we have done so much to create. But just as in our local communities so also in the world, we must participate in teaching the values of this great democracy. It's absolutely our responsibility to citizens that we give a damn, give a damn about our own back yard and give a damn about the world in which we live and into which our children will be born, a world which grows smaller each day. I was thinking about whether, how to tell young people they make a difference and I was reminded of a story that President Turner and I heard told just this week — a story I'm happy to steal before he does for I saw he enjoyed it when the speaker told it as much as I did. The story is of a grandfather and a grandson walking along a beach that had been devastated by a storm and there were tens of thousands of mussels lying on the beach and dying as they dried from lack of water. And as the two walked along, the grandson would pick up a mussel and throw it out in the water, and throw one after another out in the ocean. And his grandfather said, "Son, there are just too many of them here. You just can't make a difference." And the youngster picks another one out and said, "Well, Granddad, I made a difference to that one." And that's a pretty good story. So I would say to you as graduates of this great university, that you have a personal duty, a personal responsibility, not necessarily to always agree, but to always participate and to do your best whether locally or nationally, to keep our nation the leader of the free world, the free world of peace and stability. So, again, in closing, I congratulate you, and your families. I salute you and wish you Godspeed. Again I thank you for permitting me to be with you today.