

U.S. Senator John Cornyn - Commencement Address
at Southern Methodist University

Saturday, May 14, 2011

President Turner: Thank you for that kind introduction and for welcoming me back here to The Hilltop.

One hundred years ago, a “hilltop” was the only thing most people could see here. But the Founders of Southern Methodist University saw something else. Amidst the farmland and the prairie, on the outskirts of a growing frontier city, a small group of leaders saw a University.

I believe the Founders of Southern Methodist University would be pleased and proud of your first century of success. And I know they would join all of us in congratulating the Class of 2011.

I know every graduate has warm memories of your time here – not all of them in the classroom! Some of you spent too much time at Homebar and not enough at Club Fondren. And all of you can remember how the SMU Mustangs played in two consecutive bowl games for the first time in 25 years!

It’s my job to deliver your Commencement Address. This is an honor for me, one last lecture for you, and a good financial decision by your President.

As President Turner knows, some commencement speakers come with a very high price tag. Rutgers University in New Jersey, I’m told, will hold their commencement ceremonies tomorrow. Scheduled speakers include Snookie – from the show Jersey Shore – who is reportedly being paid \$32,000; as well as Nobel Prize Winner Toni Morrison, who’s a bit more affordable these days at a reported \$30,000. I’m here for free and I’ll leave it to y’all to decide whether I’m worth what you paid for.

You are graduating into a world with very real challenges. Some call them insurmountable challenges and say that America is ungovernable but I have just one word for this, baloney! I want to encourage you to take these challenges head on, to be confident in our abilities to triumph over adversity, and to reject the voices of cynicism and pessimism.

One reason I remain optimistic about our future is because of our past. My father who flew 26 strategic bombing missions over German targets during World War II. He was shot down and spent several months in a Nazi POW camp. And together, with other members of the Greatest Generation, he helped bring lasting peace to Europe and East Asia.

Or I could tell you that when I was a kid growing up during the Civil Rights Movement; hearing about a preacher who had been to the Mountaintop and seen the Promised Land. And then living long enough to personally witness on the steps of the United States Capitol what Dr. King could only dream of: an African-American taking the Oath of Office as President of the United States.

In other words, I could share with you stories of earlier generations who faced big problems— some of them sudden threats, some of them long-standing injustices—and hope you to do as they did with courage and passion. But I suspect a more helpful approach is to talk about the challenges your generation faces. These are the next chapters of our Nation's history that you will write.

Your first challenge is that you are entering one of the worst job markets in years. More than 13 million Americans remain unemployed. And millions more are underemployed, forced to take temporary or part-time work. Many Americans have left the work force altogether. Today a smaller share of our people are working than at any time since women began entering the work force in large numbers more than 30 years ago. Things are a bit better here in Texas, as they usually are. And things are also quite a bit better for those with college degrees. In fact, each one of you will become more marketable just by participating in this ceremony.

But however promising your own career path may be, you will soon find that each of us owes a mountain of accumulated debt. You've heard about the national debt, which is more than \$14 trillion and growing. That is \$45 thousand for every man, woman and child in this country. That figure doesn't include the nearly \$90 trillion in future Medicare and Social Security benefits that future taxes will not cover. And of course that leaves out the trillions of dollars in private debt, some of which you may hold in student loans.

The bottom line is that a lot of money has been charged to your generation's credit card. We should be honest enough to admit that it's been irresponsible to do so. I hope my generation will do its part to reduce the balance on that account. But either way, the payments will be coming due soon; and unless

we seize the opportunity to deal with it now they will limit the economic choices available to you. And ultimately, they will limit your freedom.

Nevertheless, I believe that your generation will be the most prosperous in human history. No matter how large these liabilities, our assets – your assets – are far, far greater. For one thing, you will live longer, healthier, and more productive lives than any generation before you. Longevity, of course, is one of the reasons we face such a crisis in our entitlement programs. But longevity is not a curse but a blessing. And you will be blessed in ways you cannot imagine. Fewer diseases, better food and nutrition—we've only begun to tap the potential of gene therapies and other biotechnologies. Who knows? Some of you may be around in 2111 to celebrate SMU's bi-centennial!

Your generation is also entering the greatest expansion of entrepreneurial opportunity since the Industrial Revolution. Back then, Adam Smith measured the wealth of a nation by the affordability of items that average people buy. Thanks to the specialization of labor and economies of scale, things began getting a lot cheaper back then and the "wealth of nations" increased dramatically. Still, success was limited by the enormous amounts of capital required to get the most profitable businesses off the ground.

Today, the barriers to entry are much lower. In some industries, all you need is a domain name and a webpage and you are a small business owner. And small businesses have access to the same global markets as huge multinationals.

So my hope is that if you've got a great idea, start a small business. If you don't, try to help new entrepreneurs get their dreams off the ground. Help create a culture that honors innovation, and in which there is no fear of failure. As you do so, you'll be creating opportunity and jobs for others; lifting millions more people out of poverty and having the satisfaction of achievement that comes with earned success, no matter how much money you make.

Your second challenge is to make sense of America's role in the world and how we can best defend and extend the blessings of liberty in an ever-changing world. Every generation struggles with this challenge. But your generation faces it amid a growing sense of pessimism. Some say that America is in decline but America is not in decline. True, America's status as the sole superpower cannot perhaps continue indefinitely and other nations are rising because they have adopted the same ideas that Americans have

pioneered for centuries. China has the world's second largest economy because it has unleashed free enterprise system even as it continues to be a communist dictatorship. India and Brazil are growing because they opened their economies up to trade, foreign investment and energy production. Across the Middle East, the "Arab Spring" is giving people a voice in their future as millions are rejecting the corruption of tyrants and the cruelty of terrorists.

We are witnessing once again the truth that "Freedom is not America's gift to the world; it's almighty God's gift to all humanity." Those words were spoken by President George W. Bush, who I've always thought was a pretty smart guy. After all, he married an SMU grad! And he's established the Bush Center right here at SMU where scholars will study and promote the advance of freedom in this century.

Freedom's advance around the world will be another enormous blessing for your generation. We know from experience that democratic transitions are often more difficult than we think. After all we still have U.S. troops stationed in Germany, where my dad was shot down as well as in Japan, where I graduated from high school when my dad was stationed there. Those two nations are among our closest allies and trading partners. They are good friends to us, and good neighbors to others.

As freedom expands in the Middle East and elsewhere, I think we will find once again that while the costs are considerable, the benefits for future generations will be even greater. My hope is that you will cherish your birthright of freedom and do your part to extend the blessings of liberty to others. That can mean service in the U.S. military, the diplomatic corps, or our intelligence services. That can mean giving your time, talent, and treasure to some of the hundreds of non-profit organizations doing good work in the developing world.

And that can also mean showing a servant's heart much closer to home. When Alexis De Tocqueville visited America 170 years ago, he saw how a free people cared for each other and for their country. And he observed: "Nothing is more wonderful than the art of being free ..." "But nothing is harder to learn how to use than freedom." So in other words: learn to use your freedom well.

The last challenge I'll mention to you today is your families. It's funny; I've been to a lot of these commencement ceremonies over the years. The ones where I wore the mortarboard, I don't remember so much. The ones where my two daughters earned their degrees are memories I will never forget. This

is a good time to see if you can pick out in the crowd your mom or dad or whoever has made great sacrifices so that you could be here today. It's also a good time to resolve to do likewise; to care for the next generation and to show your appreciation for what previous generations have done for you.

The challenge today is that the bonds between the generations are breaking in many places. Too many of our seniors live alone or far away from their children and grandchildren. And too many of our young people do not have good adult role models. And fathers are in especially short supply.

Today, nearly 40 percent of American kids are born outside marriage.¹ And new research has confirmed that each new family transition tends to reduce the involvement of the child's two biological parents in his or her life. And reduced parental involvement in a child's life has significant negative consequences for a child's health, well-being, and even cognitive development.

I'm not here to judge. But I do hope that you will accept the responsibility to live out the commandment to honor our fathers and our mothers. And to remember as scripture tells us that whoever welcomes a child, welcomes the Lord himself.

I believe the Class of 2011 can meet every challenge I've described this morning and many more we can't even now imagine. The key is courage.

One of the best profiles in courage I know is a man who worked for me when he was not much older than you are now. He served with me when I was Attorney General about 10 years ago. He had been diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma right when he was completing his undergraduate degree. In fact, his first round of chemo was the day before his commencement. So he was too weak to walk and claim his degree. I learned all this about him because of a small plaque that's very precious to him. To this day, he keeps it in his office. It was a gift to him from his radiologist. And it shares a famous quote from John Wayne. It says: "Courage is being scared to death but saddling up anyway."

¹ The Future of Children, p. 88

Members of the Class of 2011: I do not know what challenges each of you will face; the world-historical events of our time or the deeply personal trials that transform the human soul. What I do know is that your courage will be required.

So my friends: Saddle Up. Or maybe I should I say: Pony Up and congratulations.