

"IT'S DEJA VU, ALL OVER AGAIN"

Congressman Howard Wolpe
Kalamazoo College Commencement Address
June 15, 1991

I'm deeply appreciative of the honorary degree that is being bestowed upon me by Kalamazoo College, and I am very honored to have been invited to give this year's commencement address.

I want to begin by extending my congratulations both to the graduates and to their parents and families. I think I know something of the feelings of all of you who are sharing in today's ceremony . . . feelings of pride and joy . . . in some cases, of sheer relief!

I've always felt a special affinity for Kalamazoo College - for lots of reasons. It has maintained a distinguished commitment to academic excellence. It has been way ahead of the crowd in maximizing the importance of educating in a global society. I've especially appreciated K's other unique involvement with the African continent. Kalamazoo College reminds me of my alma mater, Reed College, also a small liberal arts college, situated in Portland, Oregon. Reed, however, was very different from Kalamazoo College in one respect. Reed had a very unique athletic tradition: if any team won two games in a row, in any sport, there would be a student editorial blasting the over-emphasis on athletics. I actually made the Junior Varsity Basketball Team at Reed -- perhaps the most eloquent commentary on our lack of athletic prowess.

At my senior class banquet, where every graduate is presented with a memento symbolic of his or her unique contribution to the college community, I was presented with a year's supply of . . . bandages!

Commencement addresses do provide the opportunity to remember - - and, in remembering, to contrast. My own graduation was in June of 1960, five months before John F. Kennedy's election to the presidency. It was a time of transition in America -- from the rather placid, complacent fifties to the often painful and turbulent but intensely hopeful and idealistic sixties. The East-West conflict, the prospect of a nuclear holocaust, the question of race and civil rights in America -- those were the issues that were exploding all around us in this period. And, in wrestling with them, we were forced to ask fundamental questions -- questions that went to the heart of what our country was about, and what we were about. What did we value? Was it possible to create a more just -- and a more peaceful world? If change were required, how much risk were we each, individually, prepared to assume?

I know these are some of the questions you are asking yourselves, in 1991, as you prepare to face your own future. And I suspect they will not be

doors of corporate America have opened -- and black college graduate finds themselves in demand. More blacks have entered the nation's "middle-class," with the percentage of black families with incomes over \$50,000 at its highest point ever, about ten percent.

However, as significant and hopeful as these developments have been, the harsh reality is that they have not touched the lives of the vast majority of black Americans. Over two centuries of racial subordination and discrimination have taken their toll, and significant racial inequities persist. For the most part, African Americans continue to lack the education, the skills and the resources to take advantage of the opportunities created by civil rights legislation. Blacks can now seek redress in the courts if they are discriminated against in their efforts to secure decent housing, but few have the resources to purchase housing outside of their ghettoized communities. Blacks can go to court if they experience job discrimination, but few have the education and skills to land the better paying jobs; the number of middle-class black families may have increased, but thirty percent of black Americans continue to live in poverty, three times the percentage for whites. Black college graduates may be in demand, but the number of African Americans entering and finishing college is actually declining. Indeed, continued racial inequities are literally a matter of life and death: a black baby is twice as likely to die within its first year of life as a white infant, and African Americans have over six years lesser life expectancy than white Americans.

And there is another, equally disconcerting reality: racial discrimination in America is alive and well. This point was driven home rather graphically in a recent study undertaken by the Urban Institute. Pairs of young black and white men with similar qualifications, appearances, and personalities were sent to apply for entry-level jobs in Chicago and Washington. While most of the employers did not seem to differentiate by race, the black applicants still were three times as likely as their white counterparts to be denied job offers. Such discrimination was particularly apparent in white-collar and sales jobs. The study concludes that racial discrimination continues to pervade U.S. workplaces, more than twenty-five years after it was outlawed.

In a real sense, America is at a turning point. We can either continue down the path of race-based political strategies, a path that can only lead to deeper inequalities, greater divisiveness, and more intense conflict and violence—or we can return to our unfinished agenda, determined to eliminate, once and for all, racially discriminatory practices and institutions, to address the historic inequities of our society, and to forge a new sense of national unity and common purpose.

I recognize that many Americans have become so alienated from our political system, so cynical about our national institutions, that they have come to believe that there is nothing average citizens can do that would make any real difference.

I, for one, reject this defeatism. I reject the idea that we Americans can't gain control over our destiny. I reject the idea that racial conflict in

Second, we need what author Stephen Covey terms a new "win-win" paradigm of human interaction -- a new way of thinking about conflict resolution -- that will enable all Americans to understand what the Kalamazoo schoolchildren came to recognize: just as we will all be losers if racial conflict becomes more intense and more violent, so we will all be winners if we can move aggressively to attack the social injustice that gives rise to this conflict and violence.

Our nation faces challenges on many fronts, but surely none is more serious and troubling than America's economic decline. All Americans -- whites no less than blacks -- will be hurt if this decline cannot be arrested. The real enemy of beleaguered workers today is not affirmative action programs designed to overcome a legacy of race prejudice and discrimination, but an economy that does not provide secure employment for all Americans. The solution is not to fight over who gets the limited number of jobs available, but to create more jobs and to train people to fill them.

This last point deserves special emphasis. For it is increasingly clear that the only means by which America will be able to hold its own in international competition in the years ahead will be the development of a better educated, more highly skilled workforce. When our educational system leaves large numbers of people unable to perform in a modern economy, we all lose. And it doesn't matter whether the uneducated and unskilled are black or white or green or purple. If our economy continues to lose ground to our trade competitors in Europe and Asia, we will all pay an increasingly heavy price.

Thinking about issues of social conflict in "win-win" terms is often difficult. As Covey observes, most of us "have been deeply scripted in the win/lose mentality since birth." It is often taken as a given that one person's victory is another person's defeat. In Covey's words, ". . . most of life is not a competition. We don't have to live each day competing with our spouse, our children, our co-workers, our neighbors, and our friends. 'Who's winning in your marriage?' is a ridiculous question. If both people aren't winning, both are losing."

"Most of life," Covey continues, "is an interdependent, not an independent, reality, and most results you want depend on cooperation between you and others. And the win/lose mentality is dysfunctional to that cooperation."

And so it is with the politics of race. Whenever we think black gains mean white losses, or that the security of whites depends upon continued black subordination, we are still in a win/lose mentality -- which ultimately means we all lose. If ever there were a time for Americans to be unified, it is now. If ever there were a time for Americans to be reminded of their interdependence, it is now. Our national creativity and resources should be focused on identifying "win-win" scenarios for those individuals and groups caught up in racial conflict.

It is clear that the key to turning things around, to creating a more secure economic future for all Americans, is to make those public

responsive, accountable and democratic governance. And, in doing so, these students have often had to risk a great deal -- even, as in Tianamen Square, their lives. I make this last point only to emphasize how much less is required of Americans who object to the status quo and want to secure a more just and peaceful future. Ours is, after all, an open political system. We can protest, we can lobby, we can oppose -- without risking imprisonment, or loss of job, or loss of life. The only real question is whether we believe we can make a difference, and whether we are prepared to make the commitment -- of time, of energy, of resources -- that is required to challenge established institutions and ways of behavior.

I have no doubt that many of you who are graduating today are somewhat anxious about the future that awaits you. But that future can be anything you wish it to be -- providing you believe in yourselves. Nothing is more important. In making it to this point, you have already reached an important milestone--testimony to your ability, confirmation of your achievements, recognition of your potential. I congratulate you -- and wish you continued success in the exciting journey that lies ahead.