

Elizabeth Dole

Notre Dame Commencement Address

16 May 1999

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for such a wonderful warm welcome. And thank you, Father Malloy, for that kind introduction. What a privilege to be with all of you, Father Malloy, Mr. McKenna, Your Eminence, Bishop D'Arcy, Ms. Ehren, and all my fellow Domers! I'm so proud to receive this degree and count myself one of you!

Father Malloy, I never dreamed when I earned my master's in education at Harvard, that someday I'd be honored by such real masters of the art of education! I have such respect for your great faculty, as well as Andy McKenna and the members of the board, and all who give so much of yourselves to make this institution thrive. You challenge minds and nourish spirits.

Not to mention the terrific athletic spirit here -- one of your greatest traditions. Notre Dame is justly proud of the achievements of both its men's and women's teams. When I saw the title of that bestseller, "How the Irish Saved Civilization," I thought Coach Davie had written a how-to book!

I shall certainly cherish my degree -- for it is a great privilege indeed to join the Notre Dame family.

And speaking of family, I'm reminded of the words of Mark Twain, who wrote: 'When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around, but when I got to be twenty-one I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years!'

I'd like to ask the Class of 1999 to join with me in a round of applause for your mothers and fathers to let them know how delighted you are in how much they have learned while you've been here at Notre Dame.

I've looked forward to this day since receiving your kind invitation, Father Malloy, and I do want to thank you for not changing your mind. After all, when you invited me to speak, you thought you'd be getting the president of the American Red Cross, instead you get someone who is currently looking for work. Perhaps some members

of the Class of '99 are in a similar position. I can report that I've identified a job in which I am interested and I'm currently in the beginning stages of a rather lengthy interview process.

Graduates -- this is your day! My heartfelt congratulations!

How well I remember sitting where you are, excited and exhausted, thrilled to be finally getting my diploma, and of course, with that big, important question running through my

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thoughts and hopes and fears, a question I'm sure every one of you is quietly pondering right this moment: "Just how long is this speech going to be?"

Well, I hope to make some friends here today, so I will be brief -- and speak directly from my heart.

You know, it is not often in life we have a chance to sit down and think about our future. This is a turning point for you, and it comes at a time that is a turning point for our nation and our world.

Seven months from now we will be welcoming the next millennium -- and saying good-bye to a tumultuous century. You are the last graduating class of the 1900s! In a remarkably short time, students will be sitting where you are sitting, who will have no adult memories of this century at all.

It has been a time of tremendous change and challenge. One of the bloodiest centuries in history -- and one of the most hopeful. An era of powerful tyrannies that asserted control over the lives, and tried to control the spirits, of millions. But also an era of mighty democratic alliances and brave freedom fighters -- of countless real "Private Ryans" and "Captain Millers." My wonderful husband is one. Perhaps someone you love is another.

Our world has seen famine, disaster, and depression. We've also seen prosperity grow, through free markets and free minds. We've learned new and terrible words: "gulag," "weapon of mass destruction," "genocide." Other new words have brought the promise of better lives: "antibiotic," "satellite," "Internet." And then there are the 20th Century terms I just don't know how I'd categorize: "voice mail," "Y2K," "Teletubbies." Shakespeare could never have imagined them!

In leadership, the 20th Century has set new highs in iniquity and the abuse of power. But it has also brought us men and women who were inspired shepherds: Franklin Roosevelt, Martin Luther King, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, and, of course, the extraordinary Pope John Paul II.

What is astounding is that in a century with so many decisive choices between right and wrong, hope and despair, our political culture has become so disillusioned. Instead of believing that strong values and committed hearts can make a difference in this world, many think that what good people do, really doesn't matter. Healthy American skepticism has too often given way to cynicism and self-doubt.

As a young woman, looking forward to my life's work, I found my highest ideals in public service. I believed, and still believe, that the greatest life is a life of service, and that public service, in a democracy such as ours, is one of the most satisfying ways to give back.

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From my earliest efforts, on the ground floor of the consumer movement, to my travels these days, talking to Americans about their hopes and concerns, I have discovered the passion of working with others, trying, together, to make a difference, a positive difference, for all.

Today, sadly, many young people can't see the wondrous possibilities of public life. They've been turned off by the ugliness of politics. They've been let down by the people they should be able to look up to.

Politics and the politics of governing have become so negative, so paralyzed by special interests, that we as a people are losing faith in our institutions. Polls recently published in *The American Enterprise* show that over half of us believe that "most public officials today are liars" and that "people in politics cannot remain honest." When people were asked to rank various occupations according to their high ethical standards, public officials came in near the bottom of the list -- even lower than pollsters.

I know that many students today have become cynical about the people who lead our political, economic and other institutions. But that leaves this class with an interesting problem. As alumni of this great university, in this, the greatest country in the world, it is you who will shape our culture, our institutions, our world. You are the leaders. It is you whom future generations will weigh in the balance.

What choices will you make?

Somewhere in the Class of '99 is a man or woman who will schedule a prime-time television show that beams into millions of homes. Another will be behind a corporate desk, wrestling over where to locate a new factory, and whether to close an old one. A school administrator will put in a purchase order for textbooks that an entire city's students will turn to for the truth. A military officer will say good-bye to spouse and child to meet a crisis overseas. Journalist, physician, musician, scientist, each with his or her own special challenges, I can't even begin to imagine all the possibilities. Some of you may even become politicians.

Indeed, if current trends are any indication, many of you will begin one career, then change, then change again. But wherever you go, you will be leaders. And the decisions that you make will have tremendous impact.

Since earliest childhood, I'm sure, you've been told how important it will be to live good lives, lives of honesty, integrity and civility -- within your families, as neighbors, as students. But how important it will be -- to carry your character and values into the world.

Many good people look around at our society and decide: "the most I can do is take care of myself and my family. Let somebody else deal with the mess in city hall, or Washington, or Kosovo" or wherever the problems lie.

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If you fall prey to this mistaken idea, we're in trouble. Our country is built on what we, as individuals, bring to the public arena. "A nation, as a society, forms a moral person," Thomas Jefferson once wrote, "and every member of it is personally responsible for his society."

And let me assure you, one individual can make a world of difference even, I might say, a different world.

Not so long ago, our tired and doubting nation was pointed towards a "shining city on a hill," and millions of people stepped forward to make the climb. We were suffering from the legacy of the Vietnam war, and our influence in the world was weak. At home, society was burdened by failed big government programs, and family savings had been drained by the double-whammy of inflation and unemployment.

Turning inwards was not an option. Change was needed. And that effort succeeded in reshaping America and the world -- freeing up the power of the individual, revitalizing the economy, and lifting an oppressive, 40-year threat of superpower conflict.

Many people, public servants and volunteers, made it happen. And I'm proud to have had a small role. As assistant to the President at the White House, I worked to help bring about critical economic reforms. As Secretary of Transportation, I was privileged to serve an America whose people were more mobile than ever before. We battled the status-quo to get safety-belt laws and air bags in cars. We also changed laws and attitudes on drunk driving in a very personal mission for someone such as me, who lost an uncle at the hands of a drunk driver.

And believe me, getting something done in Washington wasn't always easy. Later, at the Department of Labor, I aimed a sledgehammer at the glass ceiling that holds down women and minorities, a glass ceiling we still crash into from time to time! Let me show you my scars.

But when we worry about how far we have to go, it's valuable to remember just how far we've come. And when I think about that, I remember a trip I took in the summer of 1989.

As Secretary of Labor, I had gone to Poland to reach out a hand to Solidarity labor leaders. I walked through the shipyards of Gdansk with the labor leader Lech Walesa.

That August, the Soviet bloc was crumbling. In Moscow, the Communist Party's "perestroika" reforms had failed to halt economic and political collapse. At the beginning of 1989, Hungary had daringly voted to allow independent parties. The last Soviet troops pulled out of Afghanistan in February, ending a disastrous ten years of military occupation. By July, floods of East Germans were pouring into Western embassies, seeking to escape the Soviet world.

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Just as I arrived in Warsaw, the Polish Parliament elected its first non-Communist Prime Minister in more than 40 years. Soon after the vote, I was invited to attend a caucus of members of parliament. Well now, I can't count the number of Congressional gatherings and hearings I've attended here in the U.S. But this simple gathering in Warsaw, so familiar an event in our free nation, felt electric. I won't ever forget it.

And let me tell you, these men and women were not self-doubters. They had no question in their minds about the importance of taking responsibility and action for their lives. They knew that the kind of leadership you have, does make a difference, and that life on this earth does not get better unless we act on our values and our concerns.

Ten years later, the Soviet world is gone. Warsaw is no longer the namesake of a communist military pact, but the capital of a free nation ó and a member of NATO, along with two other new democracies, Hungary and the Czech Republic. A grateful Walesa began his remarks to the U.S. Congress in 1989 with these words: " 'We the People,' I do not need to remind anyone here," he said, "where these words come from. And I do not need to explain that I, an electrician from Gdansk, am also entitled to invoke them."

Nowadays, there's a tendency to think that democracy was unstoppable. In fact, there was plenty of risk. In the East, it took forty long years of human-rights struggle; in the West, forty long years of a tough defense. The United States paid a high price in Korea and Vietnam. America's world role, its intentions, its commitments, were frequently challenged, especially on our campuses.

Change required leadership with the vision and the courage to stay the course. As Ronald Reagan told the British House of Commons in 1982, "It may not be easy to see, but I believe we live now at a turning point. We must be staunch in our conviction that freedom is not the sole prerogative of a lucky few."

Today, we face a new turning point, the turning of a new century and new millennium. And as we stand at this crossroads -- in this era of political tumult, vast material wealth, rapidly changing technology, and global telecommunications -- it is more important than ever that we be staunch in our convictions.

In the past months, I've traveled the country, hearing people's concerns and what they want from the century to come. And I'm glad to say I've met countless men and women who believe in our highest values and are determined to act on them.

For eight years I was honored to join thousands of Red Cross workers and volunteers who also have a passion for service. So do Notre Dame students -- an outstanding 80 percent of your undergraduates volunteer for community service during college. Your valedictorian, Jennifer Ehren, is going into the Alliance for Catholic Education, which helps train teachers for underserved areas in the South. Jennifer, one of my most satisfying experiences that I ever had was teaching. Good luck to you. You gave a

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wonderful speech and -- I know your future students will be very lucky to have the chance to work with you!

The giving spirit, so much a part of the American character, was recently on display in the tornado-ravaged Midwest, where so many people from across the country reached out to help the homeless. We saw it, too, in Littleton, Colorado, where neighbors and friends have reached out to confront evil with good.

And we are seeing it today, in Southeast Europe, where the United States and its NATO allies are confronting the dangerous aggression of Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic. His systematic, violent campaign to terrorize and destroy Kosovar Albanian communities has sent hundreds of thousands of refugees into flight. Behind them, Milosevic's forces have burned and looted homes, shot opponents, force-marched women and children out of cities, and herded fathers and sons to unknown fates.

Tragically, we've seen it all before. Seven years ago, as head of the Red Cross, I went to the Croatian-Bosnian border to inspect a transit station for Bosnians released from Milosevic's detention camps. The survivors reported beatings and torture; brothers and cousins shot; and young sisters raped.

Just weeks ago, I visited camps in Macedonia and spoke to refugees fleeing the slaughter in Kosovo. Of all the human crises I've seen, this is really one of the worst. It was foreshadowed in Bosnia. Where next, if we just look away?

"It is not dominoes we must be concerned with in the Balkans," the distinguished scholar Jeane Kirkpatrick has pointed out. "It is the contagion of mass murder. The only known antidote is the imposition of law and civilization."

Some wonder why America needs to be involved in this. Isn't it enough that we have groups like the Red Cross to handle humanitarian concerns? The answer is simple. Wherever America's national interests and our national values intersect, this nation must lead. Our free society and global economy require an environment that respects liberty and individual rights. If we are to shape a world that is open to our values and ideals and well-being, we must accept our leadership role.

"Dutiful stout arms, ready hearts, courage, ingenuity" -- these are some of the virtues that Michael Novak has described as necessary for freedom to survive. They are personal virtues. They are virtues for a nation as well. And they all reflect a spirit of service to something larger than ourselves.

Let me close on a personal note. When I began public life, there were fewer role models than today. Not that many women found a welcome in the professions. I can still vividly recall my first day of class at Harvard Law School. I was one of 24 women in a class of 550. And a male student came up to me and demanded to know what I was doing there.

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In what can only be described as tones of moral outrage, he said, "Elizabeth, what are you doing here? Don't you realize that there are men who would give their right arm to be in this law school -- men who would use their legal education?"

That man is now a senior partner in a very prestigious Washington law firm. And every so often I tell this little story around town. You'd be amazed at the number of my male classmates in high-powered Washington law firms who've called me to say, "Tell me I'm not the one. Tell me I didn't say that, Elizabeth!"

Well, times have changed. I know that you have many more role models than I did. But perhaps, fewer model roles. Fewer offices, public and private, that Americans point to as the highest ambition of their spirit. There are many admirable Americans. But our institutions have been tarnished. It is the greatest wish of my career to help restore their luster.

Join me. Make a commitment to public service -- in whatever form it takes for you: citizen, volunteer, leader, or all of these.

I truly believe it is service to the public -- that brings out the best in ourselves.

And graduates, may you live by the words of Teddy Roosevelt. These are favorite words of mine. This quotation hangs on the wall of my office: "We are face to face with our destiny, and we must meet it with a high and resolute courage. For ours is the life of action, of strenuous performance of duty. Let us live in the harness, striving mightily. Let us run the risk of wearing out, rather than rusting out."

Thank you so very much. God bless each and every one of you. Thank you very, very much.

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