

Colorado Christian University

Commencement Address

Saturday, May 10, 2014

What a great honor to be here to address the graduating class of 2014! First, congratulations!

Second, a special thank you to your outstanding president Bill Armstrong and to your board of trustees. Thank you for your leadership and for providing a remarkable institution of quality and integrity.

Lastly, let me thank the family members, parents, siblings and others who are here celebrating. It is an exciting day. Not because it is diploma day, or the last day of school, but, for all of you who know Latin, the beginning ... Commencement Day.

So where **does** one begin? Having finished your last class, completed your last test, what will you now make of this education you have been blessed to receive? What will you now do with the skills and knowledge that you have obtained? Put bluntly, what's all this education for?

To help answer that question, I have gone to the Founders – who as it turns out, were also involved in Commencements. And I start with my favorite, the General – General George Washington – who, I learned in the course of my research, was the lucky beneficiary of not one, but five honorary degrees. First in 1776, then in 1781, 1783, 1789, and 1790, five institutions including Harvard, Brown and the University of Pennsylvania had the great good sense to bestow an honorary degree on George Washington. Given what my alma mater Harvard is up to these days, I can barely believe their good sense! But I digress.

The first honorary degree for Washington comes in April 1776, shortly before the issuance of the Declaration of Independence. In the formal language of the day, the Harvard Corporation announced the award “in recognition of Washington’s civic and military virtue.”

Yes, Harvard was grateful for his virtue. But, looking closely, it’s quite clear that, even more, they had their own self-interest in mind. That virtue, it turns out, stemmed from Washington’s willingness to leave all, and I quote, “the pleasures of

his delightful seat in Virginia, ... that ... he might deliver New England from the unjust and cruel arms of Britain”

Then there's Yale, on May 15, 1781 – honoring General Washington for his victory at Yorktown. The University of Pennsylvania in 1783, honoring Washington on the establishment of the peace. Washington College in 1789, and Brown in 1790, honoring Washington because of his unanimous election to the Presidency.

It appears that Washington, riding off to lead America on the battlefield, never wrote a thank you to Harvard.

A representative of the school traveled to the Military Headquarters to bestow the honor upon Washington, but he had already departed. But in all of the other cases, Washington responded with a grateful thank you, and a vision for his new country that relied on institutions of learning.

What was education for? To that question, Washington had a ready answer. Liberty and learning went together: Institutions of learning were essential, and I quote from Washington's response to the University of Pennsylvania – “to diffuse throughout an enlightened empire, all the blessing of virtue [and], learning”

In a separate letter thanking Washington College for the honor it had bestowed on him, Washington said much the same thing, praying: “that the great Author of the Universe may smile upon the Institution and make it an extensive blessing to this country.”

Washington and the Founders generally had an especially passionate belief in the importance and centrality of virtue and learning to a democratic republic.

The Founding Fathers uniquely understood that America more than any other country demands and relies on an educated citizenry. Ignorance and freedom cannot co-exist. A shared understanding, a shared knowledge help unify and advance civilization.

Looked at another way: in our system, people call the shots and hold our government accountable. We must be educated to participate meaningfully.

Jefferson, looking to establish the University of Virginia, surely understood the essential role of education. “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free,” he wrote, “in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.”

We tend to refer to our Founding Fathers, but, since I run an organization focused on trustees, I like to think of them differently – as founding trustees. Jefferson was a trustee and founder of UVA; Madison was the father of the Constitution, but he was also a trustee of Hampden Sydney and Princeton. Hamilton was a trustee of Columbia. Franklin helped to found the University of Pennsylvania.

George Washington helped found Washington and Lee. The list goes on and on. And this wasn't serendipity. It was because our great Founding Fathers understood better than anyone that an excellent college education should and would help undergird a nation founded on a set of abstract propositions dedicated to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

They understood that the strength of our society is directly dependent on the strength of the education our colleges provide. And how gratifying to see that Colorado Christian's very own trustees have outlined the same understanding, describing their job, as exercising – “ultimate authority of the University, accountable to God and to history.”

Thanks to this dedication, those of you graduating today from Colorado Christian leave here with an excellent education – one that in structure and thoughtfulness far surpasses most institutions in this country which are too often failing to create an educated citizenry.

Your undergraduate general education curriculum is one of only 22 around the country to receive a top-rated A from the American Council of Trustee and Alumni, because of its exemplary focus on key skills and knowledge central to being an educated person.

CCU finds itself amongst an admirable list: Baylor, Pepperdine, the University of Georgia, Thomas Aquinas, West Point. How stellar that your curriculum ensures a strong foundation in the humanities, philosophy, Reformation theology, and Western civilization.

That it seeks to sharpen student knowledge of American politics and economics. That it is coupled with a study of Christian church history, philosophy, science, and math. This is education for a life time and a guide to informed citizenship.

And while some of you may not realize it now, or even in the next few months, your education is also one for the workforce. These days, many are arguing for a more narrow vocational education. But Colorado Christian knows better.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, workers will hold an average of 11

different jobs between the ages of 18 and 46 alone. A significant number of you, then, will find careers far different from the ones you might have planned.

The education you have received at Colorado Christian – whether at the undergraduate or graduate level – ensures the intellectual agility that comes from a solid curriculum and strong teachers.

It offers an exceptional compass for navigating the competitive and ever-changing global marketplace. And it is the very kind of education that Washington sought for his country: an education that would offer the blessings of both virtue and learning.

Colorado Christian has given you a superb education. It is one that is “liberal” in the classic sense of the word: it is education not just for work and power, but education that leads to wisdom and understanding – not only of yourself, but of the world around you.

Colorado Christian has insisted that, whether you be a mathematician or a dancer, that you explore a range of paths. It has outlined priorities for its academic mission and hewed to those priorities. And in delivering a structured and thoughtful curriculum – it has made possible the divine gift of a discerning heart and mind that will truly set you free.

Most of our Founders had an education similar to those you have received. And, for them, as I hope for you, it proved just a beginning. It was the beginning of a life dedicated to reading, writing and learning. It was the beginning of a life informed by the wisdom of the ages. It was the beginning of a common conversation, undergirded by an understanding of and commitment to principles of freedom.

It was a beginning, quite frankly, because freedoms are not guaranteed.

All of the Founding Fathers were united in their belief in our democratic republic. But they were also united in their caution.

When asked by a citizen of Philadelphia what they had produced in Independence Hall, Benjamin Franklin answered “a republic, if you can keep it.”

Thomas Jefferson was depressingly cautious in looking at the state of the world. “I have looked on our present state of liberty as a short-lived possession,” he wrote, “unless the mass of people could be informed.”

Samuel Adams in a 1779 letter to James Warren emphasized the subjective: **If** Virtue & Knowledge are diffused among the People, they will never be enslav'd.

In his first Annual Message to Congress on the State of the Union, January 8, 1790, Washington too emphasized that education offers not an end, but a beginning. He knew only too well, after 10 years of leading this great nation of ours, that liberty did not come easily and that to retain that liberty, “knowledge is in every country the surest basis of public happiness.”

Knowledge, Washington outlined, “contributes in various ways ... to the security of a free constitution.” Knowledge was essential, he noted, essential to, and I quote, “teaching the people themselves to know and to value their own rights; to discern and provide against invasions of them;

... to discriminate the spirit of liberty from that of licentiousness – cherishing the first, avoiding the last – and uniting a speedy but temperate vigilance against encroachments, with a ... respect to the laws.” End quote.

All of you in the class of 2014: The task is large and urgent. In many respects, too many today focus on what divides us rather than what unites us; the PLURIBUS and not the UNUM.

So, as you begin the next chapter of your lives, listen to the Founders: Education is not an end; it is a beginning.

You have learned much and well. But you must keep learning and stay informed. A nation founded on ideals – as ours – is inherently fragile. You and you alone – imbued with the knowledge you acquired at CCU – can preserve and protect the great liberties bestowed on us by the Creator and the great men and women before us.

So let us end with a toast. Knowing that no one ever listens to a commencement address, I’m intent on waking you up. And we’ll do it by offering a cheer that Washington and his fellow Founders, sometimes I suspect fortified with a glass of Madeira, would often give on special occasions.

As the custom goes, a toast is said and then those hearing the toast join in with three hearty rounds of hip hip huzzah. While speculation varies as to the origin of this custom, many say it was a sailor’s cheer. Others say that, British infantry would often offer three huzzahs before a bayonet charge to build morale and intimidate!

So – on this glorious day of beginnings, this commencement day – let me end and begin with a toast, to be followed by all of you with not one, but three, Hip Hip Huzzahs.

Are you ready? To the class of 2014: Congratulations and May God Bless all of you! Hip hip Huzzah. Hip hip huzzah. Hip hip huzzah.

Thank you!