

Butler University Commencement

Remarks by Governor Mitchell E. Daniels, Jr.

May 9, 2009

Hinkle Fieldhouse, Indianapolis, IN

In a job in which public speaking is an occupational hazard, there are two categories I try my best to evade: eulogies and commencements. The thoughts of the audience are likely to be *elsewhere, and the chances of saying anything remotely original or memorable are, well, remote.*

But, now and then, an invitation proves irresistible and, for me, Butler's was one of those. I have long felt as strongly about this school as a non-alumnus can, for many reasons. I had so many good friends who went here. The first love of my life went here. And then there is Butler basketball.

As a 10-year-old, new to Indiana, Butler basketball was about the only entertainment our family was able, or at least willing, to purchase for me. On countless frigid evenings, someone's dad would drop us off in the Fieldhouse parking lot, and someone else's dad would pick us up, after watching the Bulldogs either beat or scare the pants off some big-name larger school. I might stumble over my own college's fight song, but I still know yours by heart.

And I'm still an avid Butler fan. I love the style of play, the homegrown teams, and, of course, the incomparable venue that is Hinkle. But most of all, I love the soul of Butler basketball, the ethos, the philosophy espoused by Coach Hinkle so long ago, but still alive. It comprises simple and timeless principles: humility, unity, thankfulness. There's not a word about athletics in it. We can bet that, if Tony Hinkle had been the Dean of Business or the Chair of the Pharmacy Department, he'd have laid down the same guidelines. Rightly, you call it "The Butler Way."

If you're like I was, and most college graduates I've known, you will soon look back and say "Wow, I got out of there just in time." It's a very human tendency to conclude that one's high school or college went straight to hell right after they left. It's typical to recall these years with increasing fondness and nostalgia, to think of them as special, and to imagine your class as the greatest the school has seen.

On the record so far, you are. Your entering SAT scores, and the difficulty of many of the courses you've just taken, surpass any in Butler history. But the record of your class has only a first chapter; what counts is what you will do with your education, and your lives, starting – that is, *commencing*, tomorrow. Years from now, when you are addressing commencements or attending them as parents, people will review that collective record, and pronounce you either a good, an ordinary, or, who knows, maybe a great class. Of course, what really matters is what you do or don't achieve individually, but prepare to be lumped together in various ways and assessed as a group.

Among the grossest and most arbitrary of such lumpings is the idea of a *generation*, a generalization at war with the obvious reality that any age cohort is widely diverse, containing

heroes and villains, angels and devils, geniuses and fools. The parents here today are wonderful people, who have loved you, sacrificed for you, and taught you well. Neither you nor they would be here, if that were not so. But many of their peers made very different choices.

Even though the whole notion of a “generation” must be discounted as the loosest of concepts, within limits it is possible to spot the defining characteristics of an age and the human beings who create it. Along with most of your faculty and parents, I belong to the most discussed, debated and analyzed generation of all time, the so-called Baby Boomers. By the accepted definition, the youngest of us is now forty-five, so the record is pretty much on the books, and the time for verdicts can begin.

Which leads me to congratulate you in advance. As a generation, you are off to an excellent start. You have taken the first savvy step on the road to distinction, which is to follow a weak act. I wish I could claim otherwise, but we Baby Boomers are likely to be remembered by history for our numbers, and little else, at least little else that is admirable.

We Boomers were the children that the Second World War was fought for. Parents who had endured both war and the Great Depression devoted themselves sacrificially to ensuring us a better life than they had. We were pampered in ways no children in human history would recognize. With minor exceptions, we have lived in blissfully fortunate times. The numbers of us who perished in plagues, in famine, or in combat were tiny in comparison to previous generations of Americans, to say nothing of humanity elsewhere.

All our lives, it’s been all about us. We were the “Me Generation.” We wore t-shirts that said “If it feels good, do it.” The year of my high school commencement, a hit song featured the immortal lyric “Sha-la-la-la-la-la, live for today.” As a group, we have been self-centered, self-absorbed, self-indulgent, and all too often just plain selfish. Our current Baby Boomer President has written two eloquent, erudite books, both about...himself.

As a generation, we did tend to live for today. We have spent more and saved less than any previous Americans. Year after year, regardless which party we picked to lead the country, we ran up deficits that have multiplied the debt you and your children will be paying off your entire working lives. Far more burdensome to you mathematically, we voted ourselves increasing levels of Social Security pensions and Medicare health care benefits, but never summoned the political maturity to put those programs on anything resembling a sound actuarial footing.

In sum, our parents scrimped and saved to provide us a better living standard than theirs; we borrowed and splurged and will leave you a staggering pile of bills to pay. It’s been a blast; good luck cleaning up after us.

In Christopher Buckley’s recent satiric novel Boomsday, the young heroine launches a national grassroots movement around the proposal that Boomers should be paid to “transition”, a euphemism for suicide, at age 75, to alleviate this burden. That struck me as a little extreme; surely 85 would do the trick. Buckley meant his book for laughs, of course, but you’ll find nothing funny about the tab when it comes due.

Our irresponsibility went well beyond the financial realm. Our parents formed families and kept them intact even through difficulty “for the sake of the kids.” To us, parental happiness came first; we often divorced at the first unpleasantness, and increasingly just gave birth to children without the nuisance of marriage. “Commitment” cramps one’s style, don’t you know. Total bummer.

A defining book of our generation was Tom Wolfe’s The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test, which chronicled the exploits of Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters, practitioners of the drug-taking ‘60s counterculture in its purest form. On the last page of the book, in a pseudo-intellectual, LSD-induced haze, Kesey chants over and over the phrase “We blew it.”

In that statement, if in no other way, Kesey and his kind were prophetic.

As time runs out on our leadership years, it’s clear there is no chance that anyone will ever refer to us, as histories now do our parents, as “The Greatest Generation.” There is no disgrace in this; very few generations are thought of as “great.” And history is not linear. Many generations fail miserably at the challenges they confront, and their societies take steps backwards as a consequence. Consider Japan before World War II, or Americans in the decades before the Civil War.

And yet in both those instances and many others, the people who followed did great things, not only redeemed all the failings but built better, fairer societies than their nations had seen before. In fact, true greatness can only be revealed by large challenges, by tough circumstances. And your opportunities for greatness will be large.

Among the reasons I usually duck commencements is the danger of lapsing into clichés, and I’d bet that no cliché is more worn out on these occasions than the phrase “standing on the shoulders of giants.” Like all such phrases, it was inventive and interesting when Sir Isaac Newton coined it, but centuries later it’s overdue for retirement. In one commencement speech I read about, our current Secretary of State managed to use it twice in a single paragraph.

Today, if you are thinking about standing on the shoulders of the past generation, I’d say “Please don’t.” Of course, I don’t mean for a moment that you should not appreciate profoundly the health, wealth, comfort, the great innovations, and the general absence of world conflict which make this age in this nation the luckiest that ever was. After all, “thankfulness” is a pillar of “The Butler Way.”

What I mean to suggest is that you take into the world the values written on the locker room wall at Hinkle, which are not much at all like those associated with the Baby Boom. That you live for others, not just yourselves. For fulfillment, not just pleasure and material gain. For tomorrow, and the Americans who will reside there, not just for today. That song I mentioned ends with the refrain, “And don’t worry ‘bout tomorrow, hey, hey, hey.” When it comes on oldies radio, please, tune it out. Do worry ‘bout tomorrow, in a way your elders often failed to do.

And please, just to revise another current practice, *be judgmental*. Whatever they claim, people always are, anyway – consider the healthy stigmatization of racist comments or sexist attitudes

or cigarette smoking. It's just a matter of which behaviors enough of us agree to judge as unacceptable.

As free people, we agree to tolerate any conduct that does no harm to others, but we should not be coerced into condoning it. Selfishness and irresponsibility in business, personal finances, or in family life, are deserving of your disapproval. Go ahead and stigmatize them. Too much such behavior will hurt our nation and the future for you and the families you will create.

Honesty about shortcomings is not handwringing. Again, this is a blessed land, in every way. Amidst the worst recession in a long time, we still are wealthier than any society in history. We are safer, from injury, disease, and each other than any humans that ever lived. Best of all, we are free. The problems you now inherit are not those of 1776, or 1861, or 1929, or 1941. But they are large enough, and left unattended, they will devour the wealth and, ultimately, the freedom and safety we cherish, at least in our thankful moments. So you have a chance to be a great Butler class, part of a great generation.

You're thinking, "Don't lay all that on me. My one life's plenty to take care of," and that's true. But if enough of you choose to live responsibly, for others, for tomorrow, the future will remember you that way, when it assesses you as a lump.

You are in fact off to a great start, provided, that is, that you absorbed a bit of the tradition around here. Here's a real, if apocryphal, story we were told at your age. It was said then that Butler recruiters would travel to high schools on the East Coast promising parents "Send your child to Butler and we will send them back the same person you raised."

Surely, if ever actually stated, that was never true. You are a very different person than you were on arrival, certainly wiser and more knowledgeable, which are two different things. I hope you are also more inclined to unity. To humility. To thankfulness. If so, you leave the lot fully loaded, equipped with all the standard features and the factory options, too. You're ready for the road.

And if enough of you drive carefully, and responsibly, one day on this hallowed wood floor some other soon-to-be-forgotten speaker will look back and say, "Oh, 2009. That was a great class. They were part of a great generation. They did it The Butler Way."