

The following address was delivered by U.S. Senator John F. Kerry at the College's 178th Commencement ceremony, held on the lawn of Samuel Mather Hall on May 20, 2006.

Class of 2006, fellow survivors of November 2, 2004: I'm happy to be here at this beautiful school, which had my admiration long before that night when the country wondered whether I would win—and whether you would vote.

Your Web site has a profile of a very smart math major in the class of 2006, Joe Neilsen. He said that once, after a statistics course here, he realized “the probability of any event in our lives is about zero.” “I probably spent a week,” Joe said, “annoying my friends by saying: ‘What are the odds?’” Well, Joe, what were the odds that we’d be linked by those long hours—not that I keep track—560 days ago? Like everyone that night, I admired the tenacity of Kenyon students.

But what you did went far beyond tenacity.

My wife, Teresa, is honored by the degree you grant her today. But she’s also here to honor you because when you grow up in a dictatorship, as she did, when you don’t get a chance to vote until you’re thirty-one, when you see your father voting for the first time in his seventies, you know what a privilege it is to cast a ballot.

Through that long night, we in Massachusetts watched you in Gambier. We were honored. We were inspired. We were determined not to concede until our team had checked every possibility. If you could stay up all night to vote, we could certainly stay up that next day to make sure your vote would count. In the end, we couldn’t close the gap. We would have given anything to have fulfilled your hopes.

And I also thank those who cast a ballot for my opponent. I wish all Republicans had been just like you at Kenyon—informed, willing to stand up for your views—and only 10 percent of the vote. Actually, all of you, through your patience and good humor, showed Americans that politics matters to young people. And so I really do thank every student here.

I especially want to thank someone who isn’t a student. Because at the meeting that Hayes was kind enough to mention—and I did take notes—the alums made it clear how much they’d been influenced by great friends, great teachers. Or a great coach. [In her introduction of Senator Kerry, Carolyn Hayes Wong, President of the Class of 2006, described a meeting Kerry had held with Kenyon alumni living in the Washington, D.C., area, so that he could learn more about life on Kenyon’s “Hill.”]

I know what it’s like to be on a team before an important game. I know how crucial that last practice can be. For the field hockey team, that November 2 was the last day before the Oberlin game. Winning meant getting into the league championship—and from there to the NAAs. So I can understand why players were upset after hours waiting in line at the polling place that afternoon. When Maggie Hill called her coach to ask if she should come back to practice, you’d expect the coach to say, “You better believe it.”

This coach had a different reaction. “I’ll cancel practice,” she said, “and I’m sending the whole team to vote.” In that one moment, she became a hero to

me, and an example to many. It takes a special coach to know there are more important things than a big game. We should all express our gratitude to Robin Cash. Her values are the values of Kenyon.

By the way, for parents who may not remember: Kenyon played brilliantly and won that Oberlin game, 3-2.

Now, it's not as if seeing brilliance here at Kenyon is a surprise. Like everybody, I know that when you look at a résumé and see a Kenyon degree, you think, "Smart. Committed. Good writer." And maybe, "Likes to see a lot of stars at night."

But there's more. The Kenyon alums I met with were so eloquent about what it meant to be here, where all your friends live, study, and play along a one-mile path in a town surrounded by cornfields. One said, "I came here on a cold, rainy October, but after my interview I saw professors having coffee at the deli, and heard everybody so excited about the Tom Stoppard play they were putting on . . . I fell in love with the place." Someone else said, "Intelligent conversation permeates the whole campus." Another said—and I don't think he was kidding—"Nobody gets drunk at Commencement."

We talked until I got dragged into an intelligence briefing from the White House. Believe me, I learned more at the Kenyon meeting.

What they said sounded very familiar. And important. Because there are other places where you can find a small community, where the bonds you forge will never dissolve. You can find it on a tiny boat in the rivers of Vietnam's Mekong Delta. You can even find it in the Senate—sometimes.

Someone described to me what it's like walking into Gund for dinner after your girlfriend breaks up with you. You see every single person staring to make sure you're all right. I thought, "Sounds like walking into the Democratic Caucus after that first New Hampshire poll."

The fact is, the Kenyon grads in Washington didn't agree on everything. But they agreed that Kenyon is a place where you have the luxury of examining an idea not for whether it sounds good but for whether it is good.

Actually, one Kenyon parent told me something that bothered him. His son took "Quest for Justice" his first semester here. That's not what bothered him. But the class met early in the morning, and his son made every class. After years of pushing his kid to get out of bed, the father wanted to know, "What changed?" His son said, "Dad, I could disappoint you. But not Professor Baumann."

And that brings up one of the things I want to talk about. For the Election Day event that united us was a disappointment. There's no way around it. Even as we flew in over Columbus this morning, I was looking down at the Ohio landscape, thinking: we came so close. So what? You cannot go through life without disappointment. No team, no politician, no writer, no scientist: no one avoids defeat.

The question is: what do you do next?

It's simple: you pick yourself up and keep on fighting. Losing a battle doesn't mean you've lost the war. Whether it's a term paper, an experiment, or a race for President, you will learn from experience, and experience breeds success.

That's important, because frankly there are so many things to fight for. By

that, I don't just mean the things we fight over in the halls of Congress. Kenyon produces graduates that produce our literature and drama, like E.L. Doctorow did with *The March*, fifty-four years after leaving Gambier. Or Allison Janney did on *West Wing*, the first show ever to portray politics with something approaching the complexity it deserves. Your challenge is to produce and perform the rich imaginative works that move and illuminate your time.

Kenyon has vastly expanded its science programs. And your challenge is to fight in laboratories against enemies like the tiny HIV virus that has created the most devastating epidemic in human history, killing more people every two hours than there are in this graduating class.

At a time when we read about the high-tech jobs of a globalized world, your challenge is to find a way to educate the millions of Americans who can't get those jobs because they can't read well enough to understand how to get online.

And now, we are engaged in a misguided war. Like the war of my generation, it began with an official deception. It's a war that, in addition to the human cost—the tragedy of tens of thousands of Iraqis and Americans dead and wounded—will cost a trillion dollars. Enough to endow 10,000 Kenyons. Money that could fight poverty, disease, and hunger. And so your challenge is also to find a way to reclaim America's conscience. I have no doubt you will.

For one thing, you have great role models. Like your parents, sitting out there under the trees. You may laugh looking at the old photos of your dad in a ponytail and your mom in bellbottoms and that crazy tie-dyed shirt. But their generation, too, faced the task of ending a war. And they did.

And went on to invent Earth Day, march against racism, bring women into the workplace, and become the first generation to usher in an acceptance for all people regardless of race, religion, gender, or sexuality.

They honored democracy by making government face issues of conscience; and I ask you to applaud them for making the world better *before* they made it better by making you what you are!

And, of course, in addition to those sitting behind you, you have great role models sitting among you. Students from this class who had a dream, took a chance, and have already achieved great things.

I know, because sitting here is a student who dreamed of being published, and felt ambitious enough to send a poem he'd written for class to the *Chautauqua Literary Journal*. And so Sam Anderson became a published poet at the age of twenty-one.

I know, because sitting here is a student who, watching a cousin struggle with Duchenne muscular dystrophy, dreamed of finding a way to help—and designed a project that involved her with the leading DMD researcher in the world. Now Amy Aloe's been invited to work in his groundbreaking lab.

I know, because sitting here is a student who dreamed of returning to the country of her birth, the country that shaped a part of my life. And in Vietnam, Nhu Truong could not just examine issues, but undertake the more difficult job of examining herself.

They all took a chance. If you ever despair of making a difference, you'll have Kenyon people to remind you of what's possible if you take that chance.

And not just from the class of '06.

One of the alums I met in Washington mentioned that every week, a group

of them meet to talk about issues. They don't think alike about every idea, he said. But they share a passion for ideas they learned here. Another asked me to tell those of you suspicious of government, that "it's made up of a lot of people like us, trying to make things better."

The group included one alum who's well known here, and getting well known in Washington. But a while back he was just a nervous twenty-four-year old, sitting silently in a meeting with a new secretary of state, until he got up the nerve to raise his hand and make a point. "Who's that young, red-haired kid?" Condoleezza Rice said afterward, to an aide. "Keep your eye on him." No, she didn't mean he was a security risk. He'd said something that, as a *Washington Post* reporter put it, "crystallized her thoughts about foreign policy." And now Chris Brose, Class of 2002, travels everywhere with Secretary Rice, not just crafting her speeches but talking about policy. I wish the policies were a little different, but he's making a mark. He's making a difference.

You know, during World War II, my father was flying planes in the Army Air Corps. While he was away on duty, my mother was volunteering to care for the sick and wounded. She sent him a letter about it. "You have no idea of the ways in which one can be useful right now," she wrote. "There's something for everyone to do." She was right about her time. And what she wrote is right about yours, too.

In a few minutes you will walk across this stage for your diploma. You'll line up on the steps of Rosse Hall to sing for the last time. You'll turn in your hoods, go back and finish packing. Maybe sell that ratty sofa to somebody from the class of 2007. And then you'll watch the cars pull away.

I know you've heard too many times the old saying that commencement is not an end but a beginning. The truth is, it's both. It is a day to feel sad about leaving Gambier. It's a day to feel eager about what lies ahead.

Because you have a special mission. Those who worked to end a war long ago now ask you to help end a war today. Those who worked to end poverty ask you to finish what we have left undone. We ask you to take a chance. We ask you to work for change. Promise yourselves, promise your parents, promise your teachers that you will use what you have learned. Don't doubt for an instant that you can. Only doubt those pessimists who say you can't. For all along the way, I promise that while you leave the campus, Kenyon will never leave you.

You will be linked by the experiences vividly brought to life today by Hayes Wong, who experienced them with you.

As you fight for justice in this world, you will be linked by the insights you all had in courses like "Quest for Justice." You will be linked to classmates whose success you predict will take the world by storm, and to some whose success takes you by surprise. You will be linked by the times you sat on a bench in Middle Path and argued about politics with people whose views you opposed—and learned you could disagree and still be friends. At some point you'll see that this small campus that changed you has already produced enormous change in the world.

But much more is urgently needed.

Remember that the bedrock of America's greatest advances, the foundation of all we take for granted today, was formed not by cheering on things as they

were, but by taking them on and demanding change. No wonder Thomas Jefferson himself said that “dissent is the highest form of patriotism.”

So if you're not satisfied with the dialogue today, if you feel your issues are being ignored, speak out, act out, and make your issues the voting issues of our nation.

You might say, “Who's he kidding? We can't do that.” Well, I remember when you couldn't even mention environmental issues without a snicker. But then in the seventies, people got tired of seeing the Cuyahoga River catch on fire from all the pollution. So one day, millions of Americans marched. Politicians had no choice but to take notice. Twelve Congressmen were dubbed the Dirty Dozen, and soon after seven were kicked out of office. The floodgates were opened. We got the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, and safe drinking water. We created the Environmental Protection Agency. The quality of life improved because concerned citizens made their issues matter in elections.

So it's up to you now to take up the challenge of your times, if you want to restore a politics of big ideas, not small-minded attacks.

Make no mistake: you'll meet resistance. You'll find plenty of people who think that you should just keep your mouths shut or that by speaking out you're somehow less than patriotic. But that's not really new, either. When we protested the war in Vietnam, some would weigh in against us, saying, “My country, right or wrong.” Our response was simple: “Yes, my country, right or wrong. When right, keep it right; and when wrong, make it right.”

Graduates of the Class of 2006, you know how to make it right, and you will see that it came from what you learned here: from a class so compelling you were awake at the crack of dawn to learn . . . from that night Teresa and I will never forget, when you waited patiently till 4:15 a.m. at a polling place in Gambier . . . or from a coach who knew that her mission was to teach you how to win on and off the field.

Congratulations—and God Bless.