



COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

By Bess Myerson

Hunter College  
140th Commencement

Madison Square Garden,  
June 5, 1973



Keeping the promise of America means keeping the promises to ourselves. If our voices are never heard on our own blocks, in our own neighborhoods, in our own city, they will certainly never reach Capitol Hill or ever be heard in the White House.

**T**HANK YOU for your gracious, warm and very generous welcome. I'm honored by the opportunity to share this important day with you. This beautiful, bright shining June day is a symbol of many things we share.

We share this unique city. It is our city—an unending challenge to our spirit and our hopes. Its quality of life is only the sum of the lives of each of us.

We share this blessed school. It is our school for now and forever more because its gift of a better understanding of ourselves and the world around us is an important part of the foundation on which we will build our lives.

And we share the past, the present and the future for better or for worse, depending on how we draw strength from our heritage, meet the demands of today, and keep the promise for tomorrow.

It is not too long ago that I sat where you are sitting now, wearing the symbols of Cap and Gown that are always too warm for June. I see on your

faces the same pride of achievement and the same shadow of uncertainty that must have been on the faces of my classmates as we also waited impatiently for the ceremony to end, for the joyful gatherings of families and friends to begin, and for the chance to thank and wish well our teachers, whose patience, understanding and support were certainly above and beyond the call of duty, or even the thought of tenure!

We were eager to get started, sure of our purpose; any doubts that we might have had were buried in our enthusiasm. We were in a rush to leave the campus and find our places in a world that seemed to be stumbling blindly, going in all the wrong directions and in desperate need of the sense, sanity and wisdom we were about to bring it. I suppose every graduating class since the beginning of time has thought that. And every graduating class has been right!

But there's a difference for the Class of '73. First, the bad news: The mess this time may be bigger; the World of '73 is majoring in Stumbling Blindly, Wrong Directions and Desperate Need, with a few selective minors like Corruption, Chaos and Cover-ups!

Now, the good news: The hope that the Class of '73 represents may be brighter and stronger than any before. And as a Hunter graduate, I know that the Hunter Class of '73 is prepared, in ways never dreamed of in classrooms, to meet the basic challenges of our time.

If anyone ever came to Hunter without an awareness of the complexities of our overcrowded planet, one ride in a Hunter College elevator would be enough to make the point with suffocating accuracy!

If any of you had come to Hunter without a full understanding of the need for equal opportunity, that understanding came easily the first time you saw a male student running through the corridors of a school built for women, looking desperately for a door with the word "men" on it.

And all of us have had an advanced course in instinct for survival, not by reading about salmon struggling upstream in spawning season, but by try-

ing to make an 8 o'clock class inching through cross-town traffic or sweltering in the sauna of a summer subway. How many stout-hearted salmon could have taken four years of that?

I really don't think that many of us, in the long century of Hunter, were ever that unfamiliar with the complexities of our planet or even our own neighborhoods, or did not know the hunger for equal opportunity, or did not inherit in our genes a healthy instinct for survival because we are city kids. We know that there are lessons we must learn quickly and well, or neither we nor the city will survive.

**W**E ARE THE SONS AND DAUGHTERS, grandsons and granddaughters, of families that came here from everywhere—from every country in the world and every section of our own country—to seek the opportunities, the freedom, the security, the human dignity that every family wants to hand on to its own next generation. Our histories are as mingled as our hopes now, but we all have our own racial or religious or ethnic memories of struggle and pain.

You don't have to scratch any of us too deeply to find the scars of prejudice and opportunities denied. For some of us, you don't have to scratch at all; the wounds are on the surface and they're fresh.

We don't have to look too far back into our family histories to find the sharp cutting edges of poverty and diminished lives. We don't have to step too far back along the road we've traveled to find it paved with broken promises. We don't need a telescope to find the blank walls and closed doors that obstructed our lives.

Each generation of our personal histories passed its hopes and dreams along to the next, and each tried to move a little closer to the goals of freedom, security and opportunity for those who would follow. Our hopes today are built on their hopes. What they left unfinished, or never even dared to begin, is the heart of the promise we must keep and part of the challenge into which you graduate.

The promise and the challenge are everywhere; but here in this great city, where hungers of every kind can erode the sturdiest hope if there are too many who do not care, we have learned that we must be a part of whatever must be done or it may never get done at all.

Others may have the privileged "luxury" of not keeping the promise or ignoring the challenge, but we, for the life of us, do not. We have fought too long for our dignity and self-respect as free men and women ever to permit that basic human right to be abused by anyone, high or low. We have come too far to permit anyone to rewrite the self-evident truths on which our nation was born, and which we know, better than anyone, do not exist at all if they do not exist for all.

Those truths are strangers in too many areas of our society today: in a marketplace that is too often self-serving instead of serving the needs of consumers; in the boast of an "affluent society," in which millions of our neighbors live in poverty; in the sophistry of an "open society," in which too many doors of opportunity are not only closed but bolted from the inside; in the pieties of "Honor thy father and thy mother," which inevitably appear in the advertisements for those million-dollar industries known as Mothers' Day and Fathers' Day, while for all the other days of the year the elderly are not only ignored but considered an embarrassment.

We hear "Love thy neighbor" from every pulpit and platform, but our neighborhoods are at each other's throats; we speak of "peace with honor," but we have to shout to be heard over the roar of bombers; we glory in the checks and balances of the three branches of our government, while one branch attempts to destroy the others. And we forget, sometimes, that we are a democracy and not a monarchy, no matter what the ambitions of any temporary holder of any office. That is the basic truth, and we forget it at our peril.

When we forget it, we give away pieces of our personal and national dreams, and our lives are less than they could or should be. The people forgot when we emerged from a war more than a

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hundred years ago and permitted privilege to find new ways to enslave a people. The people forgot when the land-grabbers decided a few million Indians was a small price to pay for reaching the Pacific. The people forgot when they were jingoed into the Spanish-American War by those who wanted land beyond our own land; and they forgot when they buried their dead, who were more the victims of tainted food sold by profiteers than of enemy bullets.

The people forgot as Hitler came to power in Germany; and many here thought ovens and concentration camps were none of our business, until Hitler marched beyond his own borders and a half-million of our own were among the dead and half as many more among the wounded. The people forgot when they ran for cover before a Senator from Wisconsin who tried to reshape the country in his own image. The people forgot in our time, and we have a Watergate—a corrupt and evil assault on what America started out to be.

And always, those who abused the idea of America and the lives of its people held the flag high, covered their own lies with the vocabulary of truth, and thundered that they were acting in “the national interest.” That’s a phrase that falls too easily from some lips today, and too often from the lips of those who confuse their own interest with the national interest.

Our nation is a gathering of 210 million people—men and women, old and young, of every color, religion and cultural background. Nothing is in the national interest that does not inform, serve and benefit their lives, individually and together.

Our national interest is served by those who give their strength to and draw their strength from the people, not by isolating and dividing the people; our national interest is served by those who believe in an open society and not in closed doors and closed minds; our national interest has its roots in the involvement of all of us in our own communities. Keeping the promise of America means keeping the promises to ourselves. If our voices are never heard on our own blocks, in our own neighborhoods, in our own city, they will certainly never reach Capitol Hill or the Oval Room.

Our national interest is rooted in the compassionate and concerned interest of each of us. When we forget that, when we fail to keep the promise, when we ignore the challenges, we accept what the Watergate planners or any other corrupters have always wanted us to believe—that the credo of patriotism is, “Ours not to reason why, ours but to buy the lie.” And that’s not how nations live, that’s how nations die.

**T**HE SPIRIT OF WATERGATE, in whatever generation it occurs and by whatever name it is called, touches each of us where we live. It reaches into our neighborhoods and our families, and twists our lives out of shape.

The Watergate mentality, which stops at nothing to win an election or buy a country for profit, is the same mentality that makes the marketplace deals that rip your budget to pieces, that thinks industrial pollution is more important to the economy than the health of the people, that spends more on bombs than on child-care, or help for the elderly, or re-adjustment for veterans, or housing, or jobs, or better schools or peace at home.

Your generation must face the two basic questions that challenge each generation: What must



be preserved if we are to grow? What must be changed if we are to grow? Those who answer "everything" to either question are equally wrong. In any generation, it is as senseless to defend everything blindly as it is to destroy everything blindly.

Other generations have attempted to answer the questions as best they could within the framework of their own challenges. For some, it was the sacrifices of deep economic crisis; for others, the delusions of affluence; for too many, the pain and scourge of war; for some, the clash of old and new in personal and public standards of morality. And cutting across all generations, the open or subtle prejudice that at one time or another in our history has made life a sharper trial for members of a particular race, religion, national background, income, sex or age group.

As you begin to find your own answers, perhaps in the belief that everything before you has been handled badly or not handled at all, you might pause and take that city kid's look backward that we spoke about—that remembrance of who we are and where we came from—and you might agree that it is a measure of our nation that, with so much left undone from generation to generation, the wonder and glory is what we have done. With more wisdom and determination, we could have done more; but it is no small thing that those before you, sometimes boldly and sometimes blunderingly, have kept alive the opportunity to do whatever we choose to do, whenever we manifest the wisdom, determination and unity to do it. That is no small thing.

It is important to remember that many things about us are right, and to know that it is precisely those things, today more than ever, that are the instruments we need to remove and change the things that are wrong.

The spirit of Watergate doesn't manifest itself overnight. It too has roots—in years and generations of silence and acquiescence. When we meekly accept fraud in the marketplace, when we accept little political scandals as normal, when we build up an immunity to shock or outrage against the

“big lie,” when we accept schools that do not teach or health costs beyond reach, when we fight a war without knowing why, when we excuse anything if there’s a profit in it, when we accept a thousand evidences that our country has been up for sale to the highest bidders, then what in our world will ever arouse us enough to say “no” to any corruption before it becomes the Watergate headlines of tomorrow?

Democracy is not a spectator sport. Consumers cannot afford to be spectators or they wind up paying the price. Neighbors cannot afford to be spectators; it’s the best way to lose a good neighborhood. Voters cannot afford to be spectators, or they may be “mandated” into submission.

Democracy means we must learn that political involvement calls for more than pulling a voting-machine lever once every four years; it means we must learn that our only undefeatable enemy is our own silence and indifference. For then Watergates or other arrogant intrusions on our lives will return to the totalitarian countries from which the techniques are borrowed. It means we must learn that leadership is too important to be left blindly to “leaders.”

The “dream” is still a good one if it is the honest dream and not the cliché that the corrupters and misleaders have tried to turn it into. The “system” still has room in it for the right answers, even though many choose to abuse or abandon it. Our “way” is still strong enough to survive any threat, if it is broadened to include everyone, and if dignity and opportunity are not denied to any man or woman.

You are not alone; other generations share your purpose and dedication to removing hypocrisy wherever it may exist on the national or local scenes. We must work together to find again the mutual respect that must exist every day between neighbor and neighbor, between children and parents, between citizens and those we elect to office, between consumers and those from whom we buy, between those who work and those who pay for that work, between communities.

As Americans, as New Yorkers, as human beings,

we share more goals that must bring us together than differences that could tear us apart. If that view is old-fashioned, then so are the human hopes we've been talking about, and so is life itself.

**I**T IS NOW YOUR TURN to make a choice: whether you will graduate to action or apathy in your careers and communities; whether you will join those who are involved, or become one of those who for too long have never asked why, those who shrug their shoulders at injustices, those who turn their backs cynically and comfortably when others' toes are being stepped on, those who "go along and get along" with anything that doesn't drive them personally to the wall.

It is an old lesson that we have neglected. How far we have strayed is evident in the testimony of one of the witnesses at the congressional hearings. When asked by a Senator why he had participated in the Watergate break-in even though he had previously said he knew it was against the criminal code, the moral code and all that Americans are supposed to believe in, he answered: "I wasn't there to think; I was there to follow orders from my superior, and I have learned not to ask questions."

That is a false patriotism that Americans must not ever learn. The world has had enough of faceless, mindless men who were "only following orders"; and the world has had enough of general publics who "mind their own business" while the orders are being followed.

We will ask questions; you will ask questions—whether it involves a Watergate, or why a needed school is not built, or why some people can't move into some neighborhoods, or why the label on a food product is misleading. And if we don't like the answers, we will do something about it.

Too many members of too many generations before you made the mistake of forgetting their roots and abandoning their responsibilities.

You are looking at our society with fresh eyes, and you have not hesitated to speak out. You bring fresh energy and leadership to those who have be-

come too indifferent, too scared, or too confused to care.

I'm pleased to be with you on this important day. Along with your families and friends, I share the pride in your achievement and the promise it holds for all of us. Your hopes on this day are our hopes. I wish, with all my heart that you will find your way to your personal goals, that your talents and fresh energies will help to bring more light into the dark corners of our communities, and that your dissent from hypocrisy will help us all move closer to the truths we want and need to survive.

Your graduation gift is a world you never made—the same gift that is handed to every generation, but it comes to you more tarnished than usual. I hope that together we can bring some measure of brightness back to it and make it as bright as the promise of this day. You owe it to each other, we owe it to each other, to try our best to make it happen. I think a better New York, a better America, a better world is counting on you to make it happen.

