

President Riggs, trustees, faculty, friends, family and graduates. It is, as always, a pleasure to follow in Judy Woodruff's footsteps.

I join in telling our nephew how proud we are and congratulations to all the other Gettysburg Bullets class of 2009. A special thanks to all those, like my sister and brother-in-law, who have picked up the tab.

And I know Alec and every one of you have promised your parents that you're on your own now, off the dole. That may be as likely Arlen Specter switching back to the Republican Party.

Judy laid out many of the daunting challenges you face. As she also noted, in every crisis there is an opportunity. Already many of you are involved in community service and civic engagement. Teach for America, CITI YEAR, the Peace Corps, AIDS projects, the homeless, soup kitchens; there are many needs that afford you many opportunities. If you want an exciting challenge and are still uncertain, go spend a year in New Orleans; one of the tests for America in the years ahead is whether we can erase that painful stain and revitalize this once great city.

But whether civic engagement, graduate school, a career in business or public service, I want to offer you the same promise made to Alec's older sister and her classmates a few years ago: You will fail.

Maybe it'll be losing a job, or in the current vernacular, being downsized; maybe a promising start-up fails; or you lose in romance or suffer a physical loss. When you fail you will feel terrible; everyone does. Remember some other folks when you endure that pain:

- Remember that Michael Jordan was cut from his high school basketball team.
- Remember that Winston Churchill flunked the sixth grade.
- Remember the principal owner of my company, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, created a global financial powerhouse only AFTER he was fired.
- Remember if we were here 150 years ago one of the country's great losers -- in business and politics -- was an Illinois lawyer named Abraham Lincoln.
- And remember over a century later another Illinois lawyer, after getting humiliated in a congressional race was written off by most politicians; today he's the president of the United States.

Indeed if you do not remember anything else I say today -- and you probably won't -- remember this challenge: try to think of anyone -- ANYONE -- who has achieved something important, something durable, that has not suffered a major failure.

To make a difference, to do something big, requires a boldness of aspiration, a willingness to think and act big, to take real risks, which courts failure. Those of you who live conventionally, think small, avoid risks, may avoid the agony of failure, it will be an easier life. It also will not be a very exciting or fulfilling one. That would be the most

fundamental failure; you have special gifts and have been given a special opportunity; seize it.

It was the poet Robert Browning who wrote, "A man's reach should exceed his grasp. Or what's a heaven for?" The qualities that will define you are character, courage and perseverance.

You have spent the last four years as neighbors to the most sacred ground in America. We are the greatest, most powerful, influential country on the face of the globe; it all traces back to those first three July days in 1863 in which America's destiny was settled.

In Washington, surrounded by America's rich past, we sometimes take it for granted. If any of you today have not, after the First Year walk, spent quality time on those battlefields, that cemetery, do it before you leave.

It is as instructive as it is inspiring.

When you think of perseverance and character and courage go to Little Round Top and relive the story of Colonel Joshua Chamberlain and the 20th Maine; when they ran out of ammunition, they attacked the charging confederate soldiers with bayonets -- and held that important flank for the next day. Chamberlain, who received the Congressional Medal of Honor for Gettysburg, was badly wounded but went on to be a four-time Governor of Maine and President of Bowdoin College. He personified character, courage and perseverance.

I teach at the University of Pennsylvania and of my colleagues and very close friends is David Eisenhower, the grandson of America's 34th president and the Supreme Allied Commander in World War II.

David had many dinners with his grandfather, more than a few here in Gettysburg. I asked him to recall his conversations about World War II; Eisenhower never discussed that great war, he said, it was too painful; many nights, however, they talked about the Civil War, especially Gettysburg; David realized that his grandfather fought World War II in part through the prism of the Civil War.

When we talk about courage and character it comes in all forms, not just the heroism of the Joshua Chamberlains or Dwight Eisenhowers.

It also is the courage to stick with principles, if not always popular; the courage to pursue the harder challenges rather than the simpler course; the character to help at-risk children or the chronically homeless or those with disabilities or caring for those in the twilight of their years. The courage to be tolerant, inclusive.

Let me conclude by giving you a couple bipartisan role models from the field I cover: politics. Both started at Occidental College in California, a college slightly smaller than

Gettysburg and similar in high quality.

Jack Kemp, who died two weeks ago, was a physical education major, a professional football player, the stereotypical jock. Except that he decided to be more, and continued to educate himself and became over the past three and half decades one of the signature people in the American public square: the father of supply-side economics and of racial inclusion.

Jack embodied that can-do American optimism and profoundly affected both the national dialogue and inspired millions of younger Americans, Democrat and Republican, black and white. He lost some races, never got to be president; he achieved more, he made a difference.

The other is, of course, Barack Obama. I have not researched the statistics but we all know a child from biracial parents, father deserts him at age two, mother often absent on professional pursuits, is a prescription for a failed life.

There were so many times that Barack Obama could have accepted less; on each occasion he chose not to. Two years ago, we would have said an African-American cannot win the presidency, cannot defeat the most formidable Democratic front-runner in our times. He said those limits were unacceptable.

You do the same. There may be a future president or political leader; a future Nobel Prize-winner; or CEO. And I trust there will be good doctors and certainly good teachers; the pursuit of a life of excellence is not defined by the fame or the riches you achieve; it is defined by the contribution you make.

And if you do that, those inevitable failures as well as the economically challenging times of 2009 will seem a dim and distant past. The experiences of these last four years, however, will shine brightly as an early compass for those contributions.

So best of luck, you have had a marvelous experience and you have the promise of a marvelous life ahead.