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Remarks of Governor George W. Bush
Prairie View A&M Commencement, Spring 2000
May 13, 2000
Prairie View, Texas

Thank you, Dr. Hines, for that introduction. It's good to be here in the Baby Dome.

Chairman Powell, Chancellor Graves, President Hines, distinguished faculty, distinguished alumni, family, friends and especially, the Class of 2000, this is a proud day. This great Texas university has produced another class of scholars, achievers and leaders. Congratulations.

Today marks the culmination of many years of hard work and striving, many years of juggling commitments, *many years of circling this campus, looking for a place to park.*

I also congratulate the parents here today. Your love and dedication made this day possible. Your sons and daughters could not have arrived at this moment without your sacrifice, your help and your constant belief in their hopes and dreams. Today belongs to you as much as it does to the graduates.

As the Class of 2000 leaves this campus you take with you many treasured memories of your college days.

Memories such as – the delicious mystery casseroles at Alumni Hall... the quick and easy registration process.

You will leave with memories such as – kicking it on the yard... homecoming bonfire... and listening to the best band in the land: The mighty Marching Storm. I'm not here to talk about politics. But if I happen to be elected president, there will be an inaugural parade, and I want the Marching Storm to be there.

You also leave here knowing that, in a year marked by tragedy and trial, you rose above and came together in support and love for one another – just as the family of Prairie View has always done.

Like any other graduation speaker, I want my words today to be relevant. So when I began preparing, I thought back to the speeches at my own graduations. I tried to recall some sage advice that has stuck with me through the years – some kernel of wisdom that I could pass along to you today. The truth is, I do not remember any. I cannot even recall who the speakers were.

All I know is: the speeches were too darn long. So I am under no illusions today. I realize that many of you – at this very moment – are pretending to be listening, but you are really thinking about the big party at The Phoenix Club tonight. So I will keep this speech short.

Let me start by reaffirming the commitment of our state to this great university. All Texans must have the full opportunity to benefit from our public colleges and universities. And all those universities must be treated fairly.

Prairie View A&M is a vital institution, not only in your own lives, but for communities across this state. I am committed to working with the legislature, and asking for more resources, to build on the quality of academic programs at this school. I believe in preserving and advancing your unique role and character.

There's a place not far from here – a cemetery. It is hallowed ground. Not just because it is the final resting place for slaves who once worked this land, but because it is, as one of your fellow students put it, “a reminder of how far we have come.”

We *have* come far as a society. We are not the same nation that buried the dreams and potential of so many men and women long before we buried their bodies. We are a better nation. A more generous nation. But we still are not the nation we could be or should be. A nation with no limits on what can be accomplished. A nation with vast frontiers of opportunity. A nation where the American dream touches every willing heart.

We are at a moment of great national opportunity. Now is the time to seize this moment of peace and prosperity to create a society where justice and opportunity are joined. A society whose hallmark is compassion and reconciliation and brave acts of decency.

To create that society of opportunity, America has to do a few things:

First, we must be a welcoming society. Bigotry and intolerance are unworthy of our country, because they go against our country's creed – the worth of every person as an individual. The worth of an individual is measured by our hearts and our souls and our potential. We are measured by how we live our lives and how we treat others.

At its heart, this creed is older than our country: Do unto others as you would have others do unto you. No matter what our religion or outlook or station in life, we can find common ground... keep the door open... listen to one another. America is yours and it's mine. It is black and white and brown. It is men and women, single and married. It is Bible and Talmud and Koran. We may not look alike or worship the same way or hold the same political beliefs. But the things that set us apart have never been a match for the one thing that binds us together: We are all Americans, united by a common destiny, determined to do what is right and just – for all of our citizens.

Second, to create a society of opportunity, we must be a nation that values strong, committed families. It is in our families where we find love and we learn the compassionate values that make us good citizens. I hope each of you will strive to build – not just a house – but a home. It takes hard work and dedication – just ask your parents. But home is where our hearts find peace, and home is where our dreams take wing.

Tomorrow is Mother's Day. I hope you've all bought your moms cards and flowers. Get on her good side now, because I'll tell you one thing – no matter how old you are or what you do, you will never, never escape your mother. I learned that lesson one day several years ago in Fredericksburg, Texas.

The day was sunny and beautiful, and more than 30,000 people lined the streets for the parade. Both my mother and father were there. I walked up to the podium, turned to acknowledge Mr. President, and everybody gave him a nice round of applause. Then I said, "Mother," and the crowd went wild. I said, "Mother, they still love you." And there was more cheering and applause.

I said, "Mother, I love you, too. But after all these years, you're still telling me what to do." And some guy in a huge cowboy hat in the front row yelled out, "And you better listen to her, too, boy!"

I do listen to her. And one of the things my Mother has taught me is this: the value of a strong faith. God exists today, and God will exist forever. I am convinced that to truly change America, we need a renewal of spirit in this country, a return to selfless concern for others, for duty, and for country. We must let faith be the fire within us. Only faith can fill the spiritual well from which we draw strength every day. Only faith can carry us through the tough times.

There are some empty seats at this graduation – some losses that won't be recovered. You responded to great sorrow with courage and faith. You comforted each other, and found the comfort that only comes from a kind and merciful Lord. Your prayers carried you through. Thank your moms and dads for that, because it is in our families where we first learn to believe.

Third, to create a society of opportunity, we must value education. There's an achievement gap in our public schools between rich and poor. And whatever the cause, the effect is discrimination. Education is the path to opportunity. And we must get it right. We will never be the nation we should be until every child in America is educated and no child is left behind. To quote my friend, Houston educator Phyllis Hunter: "Reading is the new civil right."

Many of you are planning to teach, and I want to thank you for that. Prairie View has been training teachers since its earliest days. Teaching may never make you rich. But the fruits of your labor stand to make us all, as a nation, much richer.

Yours is a noble calling, as one famous Texan – Sam Houston – pointed out many years ago. Houston was a war hero, a teacher, a President of the Republic of Texas, a U.S. Senator, and Governor of two states. Toward the end of his life, one of Houston's friends asked, of all the titles he had held in his lifetime, which one had meant the most to him. And Sam Houston replied without hesitation: Teacher.

Sam Houston was an amazing man, a real Texas hero. But what most people do not know is that his life could have turned out much differently. He wrestled with self-doubt; he wandered for years looking for direction; he was twice driven from public office in disgrace; and he struggled with an addiction to alcohol.

The turning point for Houston came one day when, drunk and physically spent, he looked into a mirror and saw the reflection of a man he no longer respected. That very day Houston vowed to turn his life around, and he did. And our history is better for it.

As you leave here with your diplomas and your dreams, I hope that you will trust your instincts and follow your hearts. But most of all, I hope – when you look in the mirror – you will always be proud of what you see.

Good luck to you, Class of 2000. God bless you. And God bless Texas.

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