Address of

Henry Kissinger

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President Westling, Chancellor Silber. I have to explain what brought me here, because I usually do not go to commencements. I met Chancellor Silber when I was sixty. Three weeks later, I was sixty-five. I learned that it is far more painful to refuse John Silber than to carry out his wishes. And it is a great privilege to be able to come here.

I met Chancellor Silber when we were both serving on the President's Bipartisan Commission for Central America. He was put on that commission as a Democrat. Very soon, however, he achieved an amazing consensus. Both Republicans and Democrats were begging me to find a way to get him off that commission.

I say all of this, however, to emphasize that there is nobody I have met whose integrity, courage and leadership I admire more than I do John Silber's. And once we got through our stormy period – and I yielded – we had a wonderful relationship. He contributed decisively to what the commission achieved, and uniquely to the humane and constructive recommendations that it included.

Boston University has experienced what true leadership is. Every great idea was somebody's idea before it became a reality. And John Silber has epitomized this at Boston University and throughout his life. Therefore, I am grateful to have this opportunity to pay tribute to him, to his distinguished successor President Westling, and to all of you for being part of such a great university.

In asking myself what I could talk about at commencement that is not too pompous, I thought that perhaps I could compare my experiences as a professor with my experiences as a policy maker. I have played both of these roles and the difference is not always clear. As a professor – or any outsider – you can pick your subject. You

can work on it for as long as you wish. You are responsible primarily for the plausibility and the accuracy of what you present. And you always have the choice, if it turns out to be wrong, to say, "I'll go back to the library and write another book."

As a policy maker you don't have any of these advantages. Problems overwhelm you. Every high policy maker has more issues to deal with than he can possibly address in the time available. Part of his assignment is to select those that have a capacity to overwhelm from those that hopefully can be delayed. But that also means that, very often, the urgent overwhelms the important. And that long range issues – and long range consequences – cannot be dealt with with the same immediacy as the crises already upon you. Moreover, your decisions are largely irreversible. There are some experiences and experiments you cannot even attempt, not because they represent a bad idea but because the consequences of failure would be too serious. Therefore, the time horizon and perspective of policy makers and of outside commentators, professors and journalists, are really quite different.

This is a particular problem of our period. When I came into government and when I was Secretary of State, we did not have cellular telephones. I had a radio in my car in case of emergency, so that the whole world could listen in and know that there was an emergency. We had no computers, no faxes and therefore the pace of decision-making was quite different from what it is today. And we had no CNN, so we were not second-guessed before we made a decision. But we also had a nuclear opponent possessing 20,000 nuclear weapons. And during my period in office, there were at least two occasions when the possibility of nuclear war had to be taken seriously by the presidents I served. We had inherited a war in which we suffered hundreds of casualties a week, something to remember today, when we expect to fight immaculate wars without casualties and without risks.

This country has had a unique experience among major powers. We are largely populated by immigrants who turned their backs on the societies from which they came. We have never had a powerful neighbor. We have always been able to pretend to ourselves, and it was largely true, that whether we involved ourselves in international affairs or not, was essentially up to us. And we developed the idea that

the way to achieve universal peace was to make all the world like America. And we thought it a quite feasible enterprise.

I have a friend who is of the view that there is no such thing as an English accent. He thinks it is something the English put on to intimidate Americans, and that if you could only catch an Englishman unawares — for instance by waking him up at four in the morning — he would talk like a normal human being. This has sometimes been the American attitude towards the conduct of foreign policy. We read, for example, that people in the Balkans and elsewhere should learn from the way the various ethnic groups live together in the United States, and that with just a little effort we can bring this situation about.

But in those areas where there are murderous ethnic conflicts, there are long historical roots. In the Balkans, conquerors have swept across these regions for hundreds of years. The ethnic identity is furthermore synonymous with a religious identity. The weak have been killed, the conciliatory have immigrated and, for the remainder therein, ethnic identity is one of the cardinal experiences of their lives. This, of course, does not justify the crimes that are committed in the name of ethnic identity. But it does mean that the problem is not so simple as to present an American plan to two contending parties, as we did at Rambouillet, and then feel surprised when both of them turn it down.

It is therefore crucial to understand history and geography when assessing the world in which we live. There is no longer a two-power conflict; many new nations are emerging. Economics have turned global, communications are instantaneous. But politics are national, and in some regions ethnic, so that there is a big gap between the world of economics and the world of communications; and the world of politics and that of international struggles. We have in Russia a huge revolutionary change. We have in China the transformation of a society with five thousand years of uninterrupted history. But their experiences are quite different from ours.

In Russia, history has been identified with hundreds of years of imperial expansion through subjugation of the nations around it. Its people now live in a territory in which many of the formerly subjugated nations have become independent. And it is a territory spanning eleven times zones between St. Petersburg and

Vladivostok, so you would think that they should not suffer from claustrophobia. But they do. They need to undergo a tremendous transformation to get used to a world in which they are no longer the dominant country of their region. To them, the issue of the Kosovo war is diametrically opposite from the way it appears to us. To them, it is not a question of refugees but of an old ally being caught up in a conflict they can neither assist it in nor influence.

In China, we have a society with even deeper cultural divisions. The Chinese have had five thousand years of self-government. For four thousand eight hundred of those years, they managed without specific advice from the United States — because we didn't even exist. So they don't take it for granted that we know exactly the right method by which they should organize themselves. And in any event, to move a billion two hundred million people from a planned economy to a market economy – in fact, to govern a billion two hundred million people – is a huge, forbidding enterprise.

I mention all of this to point out what our challenge is as a country. I talked at first of professors and of policy makers, but we don't have too many professors who have thought about this new world in its new essence; and we have almost no policy makers who have any experience with managing affairs in this manner. On the policy-making side this difficulty is compounded by the fact that our political system rewards sound-bites rather than long range thinking. Our candidates for high office have to spend three years of their life raising twenty million dollars in thousand-dollar lots, which means they have to appeal to the most short-term interests of the various contributors.

When I started out as a political advisor, politicians used to ask me what to think. Today, if they ask me anything, it is what to say. Similarly, our bureaucracy is divided into competing units, so that when your read an account, as one did in the *New York Times* yesterday, of how decisions are being made (where every day there is a meeting in the White House on how to plan bombing targets) you know that long range strategy cannot possibly be considered.

Finally, there is this problem. My generation grew up reading books. If you look at the history of knowledge, you can see that in the early and Medieval periods,

knowledge was primarily transmitted through memory. There was attendant emphasis on religion and epic poetry because those were subjects everyone could agree on. The discovery of printing broadened human perspectives and introduced a secular world and a nationalist world. Now we find that learning from books is time-consuming, and one cannot acquire all the available knowledge by reading all the books. The computer has expanded our range of knowledge in such an amazing way that we have more facts available than any previous generation. On the other hand, we acquire these facts so easily that we now know more facts than we do their meaning. When you read a book, you somehow have to imprint in your mind the knowledge contained in it because it's difficult to keep going back to it. When you learn from a computer, you just scan it. That you know you can always evoke the same facts again has the paradoxical consequence that we have expanded our knowledge while shrinking our perspective.

This is the biggest challenge before us. It is a challenge to our political leaders and to our military leaders. But it is, above all, a challenge to you graduates not to be seduced by surface plausibility; and to find some way by which the time that is freed up by the availability of computers and technology leads to a deepening of understanding rather than to an enhancement of political demagoguery.

I have a Chinese friend who claims that there exists the following Chinese proverb. (I say "claims" because I'm not sure there are as many Chinese proverbs as they lay upon us in conversation.) The proverb goes like this: when there is turmoil under the heavens, little problems are dealt with as if they were big problems. And big problems are not dealt with at all. When there is order under the heavens, big problems are reduced to small problems, and small problems should not obsess us. That is the overwhelming challenge of our period. Can we distinguish between little problems and big problems? And can we reduce big problems to small problems? The task of any leader is to take a society from where it is to where it has never been, which is a lonely task, requiring much courage. That too is the challenge before us. And this is why John Silber has been such an inspiration to me. Thank you very much.