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"Warriors of Freedom" 2001 Commencement Address

Ward Connerly
Chairman, American Civil Rights Institute



WARD CONNERLY is founder and chairman of the American Civil Rights Institute, a national, not-for-profit organization that educates the public about the injustice of race and gender preferences. In 1993, he was appointed to a 12-year term on the University of California's Board of Regents. In 1995, following his lead, a majority of the regents voted to end the use of race as a factor in admissions policy. The same year he became campaign chairman for the California Civil Rights Initiative, also known as Proposition 209, which sought to end race and gender discrimination in state government hiring, admissions, and contracting. This initiative was passed by 55 percent of California voters in 1996.

Mr. Connerly has been profiled on *60 Minutes* and in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Newsweek*, and virtually every major news magazine in America, and is a frequent commentator on television news programs. He is President and CEO of Connerly & Associates, Inc., a Sacramento-based management and land development consulting firm; a lifetime inductee into the California Building Industry Hall of Fame; a director of the California Chamber of Commerce; and a member of the Rotary Club of Sacramento. Last year, Mr. Connerly published an autobiographical book, *Creating Equal: My Fight Against Race Preferences*.

Mr. Connerly's commencement address to the Hillsdale College Class of 2001 was delivered May 12, on the College's East Lawn.

Last night, I had the great honor of addressing a talented group of 75 high school seniors and their families at the Presidential Library Scholars Dinner in Simi Valley, California. The event was sponsored by the Ronald Reagan Library and Museum to honor the legacy of leadership provided to our nation by President Reagan. To be able to address audiences at the Reagan Library and Hillsdale College within a 24-hour period... it doesn't get much better than that.

To the class of 2001, I extend my congratulations. You are very fortunate not only to be graduating but to have attended an institution for which I have such profound respect. Although I did not have the good fortune to

attend Hillsdale, I love it as if it were my alma mater. What has always impressed me about this place is the intensity of your dedication to the ideals of freedom and independence. No other liberal arts college in America can lay claim to being so oriented toward these great principles.

As you graduates of 2001 commence this new phase of your life, I want to visit with you briefly about the responsibilities of American citizenship.

I need not tell you that you are truly blessed to live in a truly great nation. This is not something that you should consider as merely a gift of God or the result of good luck. You and I live in a great nation because those who preceded us recognized the virtue of being free, of having an economic system that rewarded merit and hard work, and of seeing people as individuals and not as members of a group. The blood of many Americans may be found in the soil of foreign lands, as well as that of our own, because of their

willingness to fight and to give their lives in defense of the principles that enable you and me to live as free people, with liberty and justice for all. We must never, never, never take that for granted.

If you have learned anything at all from your years at Hillsdale, it should be the importance of principles such as freedom. To be a good citizen, you will now be summoned to live out those principles — and that will require character and courage the likes of which only Hillsdale could provide you.

Upside-Down Society

FREEDOM IS such a precious commodity. Yet sometimes the freest of people devalue it the most. Let me explain.

We live in an upside-down society. By that, I mean nothing seems sacred. When I graduated from college in 1962, there were absolutes, self-evident truths, things that you were taught to embrace without question. When former President Clinton testified that it is a matter of opinion what the meaning of the word “is” is, he spoke volumes about the times in which we live. If you want to believe that wrong is right, that east is west, that north is south, or that up is down, all that is required is for someone to say that such is the case. Words and principles have ceased to have universal meaning and acceptance in our nation.

Let me give you a few examples of how things have been turned upside down:

- When the voters of California approved a ballot initiative prohibiting the use of public funds for health and welfare benefits to *illegal* immigrants, the media portrayed the measure as “anti-immigrant.”
- There are those who are protesting Mother’s Day because it discriminates, they say, against children who are in same-sex households.
- When the *rate* of growth in government programs is reduced, some complain about budget *cuts*.
- A black college professor objects to the term “African-American.” So do I, but my objection is to what is on the left side of the hyphen, while hers is to what is on the right.
- A member of the Chicago City Council opposes the Pledge of Allegiance because he contends it is offensive to ask black Americans to “give their loyalty to a country that enslaved them.”
- In major public universities in California, separate race-based graduation ceremonies will be held over the next two or three weeks.

No one dares to characterize these circumstances for what they truly are: goofy. To do so is to risk being called “racist,” “xenophobic,” “homophobic,” and mean-spirited. In many ways our nation is adrift, uncertain of its principles, lacking the courage to defend itself from those within who place engineered diversity ahead of respect for individuals.

It is naïve, perhaps, to expect politicians and political parties to provide the necessary leadership to correct our course. They are preoccupied with getting elected and maintaining their political power by not offending anyone. To utter a contrary word about certain subjects is to risk being accused of lacking compassion. Nor can we expect the mainline academic community to guide and inform us, because that community is probably more responsible than any other for the mess in which we find ourselves. Even the churches seem incapable of providing leadership to assist us in coming to terms with some of the great moral issues of our times — a task for which churches should be ideally suited. We Americans intermarry and blend into that melting pot of America, yet our leading institutions cling to racial classifications as if they are attached to us like appendages to our body. But someone has to put Humpty Dumpty back together again, or our beloved nation is in a world of trouble.

And so it falls to the warriors of freedom — graduates of Hillsdale — to offer leadership to the nation about the principles that are essential to our survival as a civilized people. The nation in which we live, and to which we owe our love, is faced with a challenge that is unlike any that I have witnessed in my lifetime. Even during the days of widespread overt racism, we at least knew right from wrong. The nation embraced a goal of replacing segregation with integration. That goal is no longer accepted by a significant number of those who historically led the effort to achieve it.

This year marked the 250th birthday of James Madison, our nation’s fourth president. Other than George Washington, none of America’s Founders did more to ensure the survival of self-government than Madison. Madison believed devoutly that there is a natural human impulse to better ourselves when we are free from the heavy and constraining hand of government. But each generation has to be taught the lessons of freedom. Each generation has to be persuaded to do what is right for America.

Winston Churchill once remarked that the American people could always be counted on to do the right thing — after they have exhausted every other alternative. If you care about your country, you will not conduct yourself in a manner that fulfills Churchill's observation. It bears emphasizing that you have, indeed, inherited a great nation. But nowhere is it written that America's greatness can continue without constant vigilance, dedication, love for the ideals of our republic, and the kind of leadership that gives meaning to the American creed of equality, liberty and justice for all, regardless of where we or our ancestors were born. Maintaining America's quest for freedom is a never-ending task that requires courage. But as Reagan often said, "Courage is contagious."

As a young man, my grandmother heavily influenced me. "Mom," as I called her, was a very religious woman. She often required me to read the Scriptures. After reading each passage, she would ask me what moral I had learned from what I had read. My favorite passage was in the Book of Matthew, chapter 16, verse 26: "What is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" Whenever I would read that, Mom would say, "Son, you can fool some people, but you can't fool yourself." Be true to yourself and to all that Hillsdale has taught you. A college professor who shared her favorite Chinese proverb with me reinforced this lesson:

He who knows not, and knows not that he knows not, is a fool...shun him.

He who knows not, and knows that he knows not, is willing...teach him.

He who knows, and knows not that he knows, is asleep...awaken him.

She who knows, and knows that she knows, is wise...follow her.

The change of gender was part of the wit of my old professor, but her point was not lost on me: know your strengths and your limitations and, as counseled in Matthew, follow what you know to be right.

Looking Forward

AS I look at the present and future of America in all your faces, I am reminded of the quote from Ronald Reagan on the 1989 *Conservative Calendar*: "Freedom is the recognition that no single person, no single authority or government, has a monopoly on truth, but that every

individual life is infinitely precious, that every one of us put on this world has been put here for a reason and has something to offer." This is especially true in America, where freedom is our birthright. And for those who aren't born here, they come to America to adopt it as their birthright, as a fundamental aspiration of humanity. Even the leader of the British House of Commons said in 1770, in the middle of the Revolutionary War: "I love the Americans because they love liberty."

We had to fight for freedom then as our birthright and we need to fight for it still today, as we must for all time to come. Freedom is not something to be assumed. It must be earned and forever renewed. At this moment in our nation's history, the fight must assume new urgency. It is urgent because government encroaches too much into our daily lives. It is urgent because government takes and redistributes too much of what we earn. It is urgent because our rights are too often subject to compromise. And it is urgent because the high ideals of liberty and equality are too often tempered by political expediency. It took another non-American to caution us as he did in 1783, when the sparks of independence were set to propel our great nation to unprecedented heights. It was then that British Prime Minister William Pitt said: "Necessity is the plea for every infringement of human freedom. It is the argument of tyrants; it is the creed of slaves."

Ronald Reagan was right: America's best days are still ahead. The future will be better and brighter — even in my home state of California, where the lights are routinely blacked-out. There is a better tomorrow over the horizon. But it will not happen on its own. You who are graduating need to aim higher than just earning a living or a higher degree; you need to keep in mind the preservation and expansion of freedom. You need to carry your ideals with you, fight for your beliefs, and sweep the cynicism away.

When I am confronted by those of tender spines, I am always reminded of what Abraham Lincoln said to his fellow Republicans in 1858 about slavery: "We have to fight the battle upon principle alone, so I hope those with whom I am surrounded have principle enough to nerve themselves for the task, and leave nothing undone that can fairly be done to bring about the right result." Lincoln's words ring true even today, whether you're fighting for a better politi-

continued on page 5 (inside back cover — detach envelope)



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continued from page 3

cal party, a better community, or a better America. Nothing less than your freedom is at stake.

I close with the third stanza of one of my favorite songs:

O beautiful for heroes proved in liberating strife,
 Who more than self their country loved,
 And mercy more than life!
 America! America! God shed His grace on thee,
 And crown thy good with brotherhood,
 From sea to shining sea.

Be not afraid to express love for your loved ones, for your family, for your friends, and for your country.

May God bless you and guide your journey! ▲

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