

Remarks on Civility & Political Participation by President Obama at University of Michigan Spring Commencement

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THE PRESIDENT: It is great to be here in the Big House -- (applause) -- and so may I say, "Go Blue!" (Applause.) I thought I'd go for the cheap applause line to start things off. (Laughter.)

Good afternoon, President Coleman, the Board of Trustees, to faculty, parents, family and friends of the class of 2010. (Applause.) Congratulations on your graduation, and thank you for allowing me the honor of being a part of it. (Applause.) Let me acknowledge your wonderful governor, Jennifer Granholm; your mayor, John Hieftje; and all the members of Congress who are here today. (Applause.)

It is a privilege to be with you on this happy occasion, and, you know, it's nice to spend a little time outside of Washington. (Laughter.) Now, don't get me wrong -- Washington is a beautiful city. It's very nice living above the store; you can't beat the commute. (Laughter.) It's just sometimes all you hear in Washington is the clamor of politics. And all that noise can drown out the voices of the people who sent you there. So when I took office, I decided that each night I would read 10 letters out of the tens of thousands that are sent to us by ordinary Americans every day -- this is my modest effort to remind myself of why I ran in the first place.

Some of these letters tell stories of heartache and struggle. Some express gratitude, some express anger. I'd say a good solid third call me an idiot -- (laughter) -- which is how I know that I'm getting a good, representative sample. (Laughter and applause.) Some of the letters make you think -- like the one that I received last month from a kindergarten class in Virginia.

Now, the teacher of this class instructed the students to ask me any question they wanted. So one asked, "How do you do your job?" Another asked, "Do you work a lot?" (Laughter.) Somebody wanted to know if I wear a black jacket or if I have a beard -- (laughter) -- so clearly they were getting me mixed up with the other tall guy from Illinois. (Laughter.) And one of my favorites was from a kid who wanted to know if I lived next to a volcano. (Laughter.) I'm still trying to piece the thought process on this one. (Laughter.) Loved this letter.

But it was the last question from the last student in the letter that gave me pause. The student asked, "Are people being nice?" Are people being nice?

Well, if you turn on the news today, or yesterday, or a week ago, or a month ago -- particularly one of the cable channels -- (laughter) -- you can see why even a kindergartener would ask this question. (Laughter.) We've got politicians calling each other all sorts of unflattering names. Pundits and talking heads shout at each other. The media tends to play up every hint of conflict, because it makes for a sexier story -- which means anyone interested in getting coverage feels compelled to make their arguments as outrageous and as incendiary as possible.

Now, some of this contentiousness can be attributed to the incredibly difficult moment in which we find ourselves as a nation. The fact is, when you leave here today you will search for work in an economy that is still emerging from the worst crisis since the Great Depression. You live in a century where the speed with which jobs and industries move across the globe is forcing America to compete like never before. You will raise your children at a time when threats like terrorism and climate change aren't confined within the borders of any one country. And as our world grows smaller and more connected, you will live and work with more people who don't look like you or think like you or come from where you do.

I really enjoyed Alex's remarks because that's a lot of change. And all these changes, all these challenges, inevitably cause some tension in the body politic. They make people worry about the future and sometimes they get people riled up.

But I think it's important that we maintain some historic perspective. Since the days of our founding, American politics has never been a particularly nice business. It's always been a little less genteel during times of great change. A newspaper of the opposing party once editorialized that if Thomas Jefferson were elected, "Murder, robbery, rape, adultery, and incest will be openly taught and practiced." (Laughter.) Not subtle. Opponents of Andrew Jackson often referred to his mother as a "common prostitute," which seems a little over the top. (Laughter.) Presidents from Teddy Roosevelt to Lyndon Johnson have been accused of promoting socialism, or worse. And we've had arguments between politicians that have been settled with actual duels. There was even a caning once on the floor

of the United States Senate — which I'm happy to say didn't happen while I was there. (Laughter.) It was a few years before. (Laughter.)

The point is, politics has never been for the thin-skinned or the faint-of-heart, and if you enter the arena, you should expect to get roughed up. Moreover, democracy in a nation of more than 300 million people is inherently difficult. It's always been noisy and messy, contentious, complicated. We've been fighting about the proper size and role of government since the day the Framers gathered in Philadelphia. We've battled over the meaning of individual freedom and equality since the Bill of Rights was drafted. As our economy has shifted emphasis from agriculture to industry, to information, to technology, we have argued and struggled at each and every juncture over the best way to ensure that all of our citizens have a shot at opportunity.

So before we get too depressed about the current state of our politics, let's remember our history. The great debates of the past all stirred great passions. They all made somebody angry, and at least once led to a terrible war. What is amazing is that despite all the conflict, despite all its flaws and its frustrations, our experiment in democracy has worked better than any form of government on Earth. (Applause.)

On the last day of the Constitutional Convention, Benjamin Franklin was famously asked, "Well, Doctor, what have we got — a republic or a monarchy?" And Franklin gave an answer that's been quoted for ages: He said, "A republic, if you can keep it." If you can keep it.

Well, for more than 200 years, we have kept it. Through revolution and civil war, our democracy has survived. Through depression and world war, it has prevailed. Through periods of great social and economic unrest, from civil rights to women's rights, it has allowed us slowly, sometimes painfully, to move towards a more perfect union.

And so now, class of 2010, the question for your generation is this: How will you keep our democracy going? At a moment when our challenges seem so big and our politics seem so small, how will you keep our democracy alive and vibrant; how will you keep it well in this century?

I'm not here to offer some grand theory or detailed policy prescription. But let me offer a few brief reflections based on my own experiences and the experiences of our country over the last two centuries....

So, yes, we can and should debate the role of government in our lives. But remember, as you are asked to meet the challenges of our time, remember that the ability for us to adapt our government to the needs of the age has helped make our democracy work since its inception.

Now, the second way to keep our democracy healthy is to maintain a basic level of civility in our public debate. (Applause.) These arguments we're having over government and health care and war and taxes -- these are serious arguments. They should arouse people's passions, and it's important for everybody to join in the debate, with all the vigor that the maintenance of a free people requires.

But we can't expect to solve our problems if all we do is tear each other down. (Applause.) You can disagree with a certain policy without demonizing the person who espouses it. You can question somebody's views and their judgment without questioning their motives or their patriotism. (Applause.) Throwing around phrases like "socialists" and "Soviet-style takeover" and "fascist" and "right-wing nut" -- (laughter) -- that may grab headlines, but it also has the effect of comparing our government, our political opponents, to authoritarian, even murderous regimes.

Now, we've seen this kind of politics in the past. It's been practiced by both fringes of the ideological spectrum, by the left and the right, since our nation's birth. But it's starting to creep into the center of our discourse. And the problem with it is not the hurt feelings or the bruised egos of the public officials who are criticized. Remember, they signed up for it. Michelle always reminds me of that. (Laughter.) The problem is that this kind of vilification and over-the-top rhetoric closes the door to the possibility of compromise. It undermines democratic deliberation. It prevents learning — since, after all, why should we listen to a "fascist," or a "socialist," or a "right-wing nut," or a left-wing nut"? (Laughter.)

It makes it nearly impossible for people who have legitimate but bridgeable differences to sit down at the same table and hash things out. It robs us of a rational and serious debate, the one we need to have about the very real and

very big challenges facing this nation. It coarsens our culture, and at its worst, it can send signals to the most extreme elements of our society that perhaps violence is a justifiable response.

So what do we do? As I found out after a year in the White House, changing this type of politics is not easy. And part of what civility requires is that we recall the simple lesson most of us learned from our parents: Treat others as you would like to be treated, with courtesy and respect. (Applause.) But civility in this age also requires something more than just asking if we can't just all get along.

Today's 24/7 echo-chamber amplifies the most inflammatory soundbites louder and faster than ever before. And it's also, however, given us unprecedented choice. Whereas most Americans used to get their news from the same three networks over dinner, or a few influential papers on Sunday morning, we now have the option to get our information from any number of blogs or websites or cable news shows. And this can have both a good and bad development for democracy. For if we choose only to expose ourselves to opinions and viewpoints that are in line with our own, studies suggest that we become more polarized, more set in our ways. That will only reinforce and even deepen the political divides in this country.

But if we choose to actively seek out information that challenges our assumptions and our beliefs, perhaps we can begin to understand where the people who disagree with us are coming from.

Now, this requires us to agree on a certain set of facts to debate from. That's why we need a vibrant and thriving news business that is separate from opinion makers and talking heads. (Applause.) That's why we need an educated citizenry that values hard evidence and not just assertion. (Applause.) As Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan famously once said, "Everybody is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts." (Laughter.)

Still, if you're somebody who only reads the editorial page of The New York Times, try glancing at the page of The Wall Street Journal once in a while. If you're a fan of Glenn Beck or Rush Limbaugh, try reading a few columns on the Huffington Post website. It may make your blood boil; your mind may not be changed. But the practice of listening to opposing views is essential for effective citizenship. (Applause.) It is essential for our democracy. (Applause.)

And so, too, is the practice of engaging in different experiences with different kinds of people. I look out at this class and I realize for four years at Michigan you have been exposed to diverse thinkers and scholars, professors and students. Don't narrow that broad intellectual exposure just because you're leaving here. Instead, seek to expand it. If you grew up in a big city, spend some time with somebody who grew up in a rural town. If you find yourself only hanging around with people of your own race or ethnicity or religion, include people in your circle who have different backgrounds and life experiences. You'll learn what it's like to walk in somebody else's shoes, and in the process, you will help to make this democracy work. (Applause.)

Which brings me to the last ingredient in a functioning democracy, one that's perhaps most basic -- and it's already been mentioned -- and that is participation.

Class of 2010, I understand that one effect of today's poisonous political climate is to push people away from participation in public life. If all you see when you turn on the TV is name-calling, if all you hear about is how special interest lobbying and partisanship prevented Washington from getting something done, you might think to yourself, "What's the point of getting involved?"

Here's the point. When we don't pay close attention to the decisions made by our leaders, when we fail to educate ourselves about the major issues of the day, when we choose not to make our voices and opinions heard, that's when democracy breaks down. That's when power is abused. That's when the most extreme voices in our society fill the void that we leave. That's when powerful interests and their lobbyists are most able to buy access and influence in the corridors of power -- because none of us are there to speak up and stop them. ..