

Feinstein -- 1993

First of all, let me say how honored I am to become a part of this class of 1993. Suddenly, I feel, believe it or not, 38 years younger.

To tell the truth, I can't remember who delivered our commencement speech 38 years ago, and I suspect that over time, you won't remember either who it was who gave that one last lecture before you actually received your diploma.

So in preparing these remarks, I tried to keep in mind what one critic said years ago of a particularly long-winded speaker: "He doesn't understand that a speech doesn't have to be eternal to be immortal."

What I say here won't be immortal, but I promise it won't be eternal either.

Let me begin with the span of time between my first and second Stanford graduations. Most of the time, whatever we do in our lives, we live through change in the wider world almost unconscious of it moment to moment, accepting it in increments or even as singular events, but seldom stepping back to see the depth and sweep of the transformations before us.

But look at the view from one mountaintop to another--from my graduation in 1955 to yours in 1993.

As we graduated then, a career in business meant something stable, permanent, steady--like banks of the Big Three in the auto industry. There was no Silicon Valley. A computer was a UNIVAC that filled entire rooms and, once every four years, clankingly projected Presidential elections for the three television networks -- which themselves were pretty much the substance of all TV.

When I graduated, no one had ever heard of the environmental movement; the word "environment" would have sounded technical and almost strange to us.

Communism was an implacable foe, an immovable force that only moved forward. I remember as student body vice president going back to Washington to watch the McCarthy Hearings, one of the dark stains on the day, that took place that very year, which sought to purge Communists from Hollywood, from education, from business.

Racial segregation was legal in public accommodations; it was accepted and often barely questioned in private clubs and private lives.

And, as a recent issue of the alumni magazine described it, gay and lesbian students even on this enlightened campus had to hide their identity--or pay a very high price in lost opportunity, lost regard and lost friendships.

Political clubs, one of which I founded, could not meet on campus, but had to meet off campus. Women still came to college, it was thought and said, primarily to get their MRS degree.

In my class, there were students who might become mayor of San Francisco someday. My classmates only wondered who *he* might be.

There were students who might someday be governor of California or a United States Senator--and you could hear discussions of who would be the best *man* for that job.

And of course, as on so many campuses, there was a student or two who conceivably could be President of the United States--if luck broke right for *him*. Obviously all the barriers haven't come down--or at least not quite yet.

All of this, I suspect, was and is part of the enduring, recurring openness and optimism of the college experience--in which all things seem possible except perhaps getting all "A"s--and some of you have done even that. But many more things are always possible than all that we have imagined--in 1955 or 1993.

The only difference is: We can look back and predict the past, but we can't know the changes you will now find and shape and live.

When I left Stanford on that first graduation day, I surely did not think I would return in the way I have today. I didn't know what I really wanted to do. I had accepted an internship in the vague arena of public affairs with the CORO Foundation in San Francisco. And that summer I spent in a small cottage in College Terrace, while I worked as a secretary in the Behavioral Sciences Center and played a little golf.

I must confess that in the long afternoons of that bright, long ago summer, I did not set out to be the first woman to hold this or that public office. And I did not expect to be one of many women who would have both happy and unhappy marriages; I had hoped to get it right the first time. And I had hoped to be a mother and a grandmother, and that at least has come true.

So the most important thing I can say to you today is that now you are about to enter, in a fuller sense than ever before, on the great and unpredictable adventure that is your own life. And to live it to the fullest, you have to be able to accept challenge, to take some risk, but always to protect your integrity.

In one way or another, you will often stand at a crossroad: One path will be safety and certainty; on the other, an uncertain challenge, an undefined change, a new business to be entered, a book to be written, an uncharted course to be taken--whether it leads to a breakthrough in public policy, or a profound reshaping of your own personal values.

You begin this journey when your country is also at a crossroads, facing a period of profound and often painful economic transition. You will be affected by that, but it is also up to all of us to affect and to direct it. The prediction that the next generation will live a lesser life than their parents is a threat but not a destiny unless we by our inaction make it so.

From Stanford to the United States Senate, the defining issue is fundamentally the same: You were not educated, and we were not elected, in order to preside over the downsizing of the American dream. You were not educated, and we were not elected, to preside of the diminution of our standard of living. And you were not educated and we were not elected to preside over the downsizing of the California dream.

Our country and our state, we as a people, must also decide to take the path of risk and change--not to cling to things as they are; not to look out only for ourselves, to protect and maximize our own individual part of a diminished America. That is not only wrong; it will not work. Ultimately, a few of us will prosper in a national decline, and more and more of us will be left behind.

The only real choice is to make the hard choice--which is at the heart of the present struggle in Washington. I am not here to urge a particular course, although I have strong views. That is not the right speech; this is not the right day. You did not come to graduation to hear a lengthy argument for an economic plan. But I do fervently urge three principles.

First, to do nothing, to make no sacrifice, is to attempt to relive and revive the 1980's. It is not an option--it is a disaster. We cannot afford another decade of deficits,

of decaying infrastructure and delayed decisions. This state of California does predict the nation's future--and right now that future hangs in the balance.

It is time for a rational plan for defense conversion instead of the random closing of bases and the piecemeal cancellation of defense contracts. Otherwise, we risk losing for both our state and our nation the greatest resources of scientific, technical and human capital ever gathered together in human history.

Second, while political differences are real and legitimate, they must not be made so all-important that all else is subordinated to them. Since going to the Senate, I have been astonished by the primacy of partisanship--by the willingness, even when the nation is undeniably in trouble, to treat the great issues as occasions to score small points or attract a few voters. I reject the view that the next election will reward those who simply oppose. They may differ, but they have an obligation to propose alternatives and find common ground.

And above all else, I believe that Americans want those of us in Washington to think not just of ourselves and the next election, but of our country and the next generation. I am convinced that leaders who lack that vision will be replaced; that people are smarter than the political operatives. Attempting to solve problems and reduce deficits may be risky; but in the end, those who pursue only partisan gain will reap only political loss.

Third, as others have before us at decisive points in our national experience, we must welcome change--and not shrink from it. Yes, change can be difficult; it can have a human cost--and competing in a world economy can be more demanding than competing with Seattle or Chicago. But resisting change won't stop it; it will only increase its burdens and reduce its potential benefits.

We must pay the price to educate; we must provide incentives to innovate; we must demand responsibility from our trading partners and our own corporations--and then, if we make the effort, even when it's hard, there is no reason why California cannot continue to lead the nation, and America continue to lead the world.

One thing above all we must not do, and that is to play the easy politics of nostalgia. The good old days were not so good--for African American, for Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans or any other minority--or for the majority who are women.

Beyond this, the graduates of 1955 took for granted not only the notion of limitless American economic domination--but the specter of limitless nuclear destruction, which could occur at any time--and which many of us assumed surely would occur at some time.

One does not have to be a believer in the inevitability of progress to acknowledge and even celebrate the progress we have made since then. But now change will continue; it can be good or bad--but it won't be stayed. As Heraclitus, one of the first philosophers, wrote, "You cannot step into the same river twice." And the success of our society so far does not guarantee its success tomorrow.

For that reason, I hope that all of you, in one way or another, apart from whatever else you do in life, will also take some interest or part in public life. You've received a fine education from a great university. And with that comes the responsibility and the obligation to put your divot back.

You cannot all have--and most of you might not want--a career in public service. But if you stand entirely on the sidelines, if you don't think about these issues, if you

simply vote Republican because of taxes or Democratic because of health care, you will permit and invite the kind of leadership that only takes polls so that it can find out how to follow.

On the other hand, if you care, you will find countless different ways to have an effect on events--from a community park, to a school board, to a Presidential primary--and the aggregation of all those effects can make you proud, 38 years from now, of the country you have shaped for your children, your grandchildren and the members of the Stanford class of '31--that is, two thousand and thirty-one.

Early on, here on this campus, I learned to live with risk and change. My father wanted me to be a doctor--he was a great one--but I couldn't get over that "D" in genetics. So I found political science and history--and while I did not realize it at the time, I also found the direction and then the vocation of my life.

Each of you now has your own beginning; each of you will know your own turns of fate; all of you will see analogues to the "year of the Woman," or to the outrages of the Anita Hill hearing--and you, too, will be moved to act.

Along the way, perhaps you can help to redeem the public trust by helping to shape practical solutions to real problems--and by doing it with honesty and integrity. And to business, law, or any profession you might enter, you can bring a commitment to principle--and to measuring your deeds by more than the narrowest standard of self-interest. While we cannot all be in public service, we can all have a spirit of public concern.

The Country and Western singer Garth Brooks tells us in his song "The River":

"Too many times we stand aside
and let the waters slip away.
Till what you put off till tomorrow
has now become today.
So don't you sit up on the shoreline
and say you are satisfied.
Choose to chance the rapids
Dare to dance the tide."

On this graduation day, you have arrived at a shoreline that once, only a few years ago, seemed very far away. So in the hours ahead, take the time to dance to the music of celebration.

And then, in the years ahead, don't just ride the tide; for yourselves, for the families you'll have, for your communities and for your country, help to change the channel--to turn the course of events, to master the tides--and never, never, no matter what you have accomplished, be fully satisfied.

Thank you, and congratulations, Class of 1993.