

Governor James J. Blanchard
Commencement Address
University of Michigan
May 4, 1985

EMBARGOED UNTIL 1 P.M., SATURDAY, 5/4

It is a great honor for me to be here today for this commencement ceremony. The degree that you have conferred upon me is an even greater honor.

I am reminded of a comment that John F. Kennedy made 23 years ago, when he went to a small university in New Haven, Connecticut to deliver the commencement address. He said that he felt he had finally arrived at the proper blend: an education from Harvard and a diploma from Yale.

Those of us here today know that President Kennedy had the right idea -- but the wrong geography: the best of both worlds really is a Michigan State education and a University of Michigan degree.

In his address at Yale more than two decades ago, President Kennedy spoke eloquently of change. Today, I, too, would like to speak of change -- but perhaps with more candor than eloquence.

For the past four years, change has been a constant companion in your lives. I do not mean the change that one parent observed in his offspring after four years here: from overconfident ignorance as a freshman to thoughtful uncertainty as a senior. The truth is these last few years of your lives at this university have been a time of great personal growth and development -- reflecting, in part, the rhythm of life.

There are rhythms in the life of a state, as well. And for our state, the past few years have been a time of renewal, a time of pulling together, a time of hard work.

As much as anything, however, the past few years in Michigan have been a time of adapting to change. And though you may not have recognized it, as you went about your own thought-filled careers and confronted your own personal challenges here in the intense calm of this campus, you have, in fact, been at the epicenter of an unprecedented global shift.

Over just the past few years, two fundamental changes have redefined our world.

First, economic competition shifted from a national to a global scale. Second, the information society, long predicted, finally arrived.

To some, these changes may sound like vague and distant abstractions. But they are quite real and tangible. Today they are a routine part of daily life -- as close to you, perhaps, as your own home, where you can see them in coffeemakers imported from Germany, jewelry from Italy, shoes from England, silverware from Sweden, clothes from Taiwan, furniture from Canada, and, yes, cars and cameras and televisions from

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Japan.

And you can see them, as well, in the sophisticated communications systems and the growing use of robotics in the world around us.

The separate impacts of these two powerful forces are immediately apparent to all of us. They are reflected in:

- * an enormous deficit in our country's balance of trade
- * deep, structural unemployment as entire industries confront foreign competition
- * and technology that is redefining the content and the very meaning of work.

Each of these changes is touching millions of lives. The impacts directly affect our families and communities, long-standing businesses and time-honored institutions. Indeed, who among us has not had his or her hopes, dreams and aspirations changed because of these sweeping trends?

As broad as these impacts seem, however, they are really only superficial changes compared to the one new fundamental truth that has emerged. Today, the human mind is the instrument for excellence and the world is the yardstick for measuring it.

Very simply, our future depends on our ability to be the best in the world -- and not only in our products, but even more important, in our thinking.

Make no mistake. What I am talking about here is you. For the change that washed across this state at about the time that you began your odyssey here was targeted directly at each one of you.

This university has always been -- and must always be -- a world class institution, an educational flagship not just for the state or even for the country, but for the world. And your growth, training and development here embody the mission of producing the best minds in this country, for the future of this country.

But the hard truth is that the waves of change that hit Michigan just as you were entering this university nearly overwhelmed our capacity to respond. In the vicious cycle of spreading economic dislocation, soaring unemployment and a paralyzing state budget crisis, we nearly lost sight of the very institutions that represent Michigan's heart -- and it's future: our colleges and universities.

- * Faced with a tightening economic squeeze, this great university confronted serious cutbacks that jeopardized education quality.

- * Across the state, 12 out of 15 public colleges and universities were close to insolvency; for them it was not a matter of keeping their quality up -- it was a matter of keeping their doors open.

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* Symptomatic of our lost direction was one dismal fact: Michigan ranked dead last in the country in the rate of increase of support for higher education.

It is now a matter of record -- a proud chapter in The Michigan Story -- that the people of Michigan saw these threats -- and they responded the way our people have always responded. They relied on their common sense, their commitment to quality, and their good old-fashioned courage.

Today we have begun to come to terms with these threats to Michigan's future. And today, you and your achievements and the luster of this university are the proud evidence of the success of our efforts.

Today we all know that you cannot be a world class state, without a world class university. And today, once again, there is no doubt that the University of Michigan is a world class university. It is indeed the crown jewel of public education in the world.

And the evidence of our state's commitment to excellence is clear.

* As a downpayment on the future, we not only rescued much of our educational system from bankruptcy, we reversed the dangerous trend of disinvestment over the past two years. We have provided record back-to-back increases for Michigan universities as an investment in learning. And we are determined that Michigan's support for education will once again match the thirst of our people for knowledge.

* Only a few months ago, here on this campus, we broke ground for a new engineering building -- the first new publically financed building here in a decade. It is only a part of a much larger campaign of bricks and mortar, which represents our commitment to Michigan students and faculty to provide world class laboratories, classrooms and learning facilities.

* We believe that excellence in education should not discriminate on the basis of income or race or sex. Further, we believe that Michigan's future depends upon each of Michigan's children having the opportunity to fulfill her or his potential.

For that reason, this year we froze tuition at all 15 of Michigan's public colleges and universities and proposed an expanded student loan program as a further invitation to opportunity.

* We now have in hand the report of the Governor's Commission on the Future of Higher Education in Michigan. It's a blueprint for investing in people and working together to safeguard and improve this cornerstone of Michigan's future.

Here in Michigan, we are creating our own future -- and, it is built on our belief that the heart of the future is in the minds of our people. For those who want to gain a glimpse of Michigan's future, let them come to Ann Arbor.

It is no coincidence that the finest minds in the world in the fields of robotics, machine vision and manufacturing technology are coming

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together here in Ann Arbor. Here education and science can act as a catalyst with business to produce new opportunities, new products, and new jobs for all of our people.

And I wish that you could see the eyes of our friendly competitors in Japan open with surprise when I tell them that the largest Japanese library in the world outside of Japan is right here in Ann Arbor.

But it should come as no surprise that Michigan is fast becoming the nation's center and soon the world's center of complex manufacturing. One big reason for that is the intellectual power here in Ann Arbor.

Here in Michigan, we are not only building a better future with our hands -- we are inventing it with our minds.

But it would be a mistake to think of this great university as just a training ground for economic competition. To do that would be to confuse the uses of an education with the purpose of an education.

A great university -- and this is a great university -- does not exist just to help you seek a job; it exists to encourage you to seek the truth.

It exists so that free people in a free society can exercise their God-given right to think and to give voice to their thoughts.

It exists as the center of debate -- less a marketplace of skills than a marketplace of ideas.

It exists as the best antidote we have to overly-simplistic notions and phoney nostrums of all kinds.

More than an economic force, it exists as a moral force -- a place where the issues of our time, from Nicaragua and South Africa to Star Wars and equal opportunity, can be discussed in the light of the problems of all time. A place where the difference between Auschwitz and Bitburg can be remembered for all time.

In a tangled world of difficult choices and conflicting testimony, the University exists as a clearinghouse of truth -- a place where you can come to give order to complexity and explore solutions for intractable problems.

It is a place where you come to learn how to think, not what to think.

It is, finally, a place where you seek to become not just smarter, but truly wiser.

For if this place of learning is to live up to its promise, it will be through what it has imparted to you -- the qualities and the character, as much as the raw data and information. You are its living legacy.

And so each time any one of you refuses to settle for the easy answers, this university will have done its job.

When you reject the false comfort of stereotypes, this university will

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shine with pride.

When you ask more of yourselves, of your peers and your community, this university will have stood for something important.

And when you, by your personal conduct, give meaning to the values that this university embodies -- justice and fairness, a sense of history, of beauty and tradition -- then you will be rekindling the light of learning that burns so brightly here in Ann Arbor.

For each of you now is part of a long tradition that beats to the pulse of this school and this state -- a tradition that describes the character of Michigan: a tradition of generosity, of giving back as much or more than has been given to you; a tradition of hard work and commitment to excellence; a tradition of courage.

"To be courageous requires no exceptional qualifications," wrote John F. Kennedy, "no magic formula, no special combination of time, place and circumstance. It is an opportunity that sooner or later is presented to us all."

In each generation, the people of this state have shown their courage --most recently in rallying to the cause of Michigan in a time of deep economic peril.

In the times ahead, you will be tested. You, too, will have your opportunity.

But we in Michigan know that, in the face of adversity, the only alternative to perseverance is failure. And failure is not a word in the Michigan vocabulary.

Strengthened by your years at this university, tempered by the qualities that are at the tap root of Michigan's character, I am confident that when you are tested, you, too, will prevail.

The people of this state are proud of that heritage and today we are all proud of you.

Congratulations, good luck and hail to the Victors.