

In Defense of Cynicism and the American Dream

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Thanks for the effusive introduction. It makes me wish my parents could have been here for it. Dad would have appreciated it. And Mom would have believed it.

President Perry, members of the faculty, and to the graduating Class of 2012 and to all their family and guests. It is a great honor to be invited to be EIU's commencement speaker.

I have to admit I was surprised and a little overwhelmed to be asked to give today's address, and I was initially at a loss to figure out what I might say. I didn't consider this daunting because I was asked to speak to a large gathering. I do quite a bit of public speaking, but this is the first time I can remember being asked to give a speech while in costume. Not only am I in costume; you are too. It's like I am speaking at Hogwarts.

The main reason I found this to be somewhat intimidating is because I wanted to make sure I had something worth saying that befits this momentous and happy occasion. We are here, after all, to celebrate the achievements of our graduates, and reflect on what lies before them. So to prepare for this, I did what any good lawyer would do – I started doing some research. I read other commencement speeches, and watched examples on Youtube. You know – to see whose work I might steal.

I learned something very important from this research. I found that almost none of the speakers could remember what had been said at their own graduations. I know I can't. They couldn't even recall who their graduation speakers *were*. So, secure in the knowledge that in a very short time you will not remember me, or anything I have to say today, I am relieved to tell you that a lot of the pressure is off.

But as you may know, I grew up in Mattoon, so I face a different kind of pressure today. Because I am home, it means I have friends and family members in the audience – people whose primary reaction to seeing me up here at the podium is: "*Seriously?* This is the best Eastern could do for a commencement speaker? I knew that guy when he was trying to write a major paper in the last 2 hours before the last class of the term. I knew him when I had to drag him home after last call at Rocs. You know who you are.

To those of you who knew me way back when, I just want to say one thing with love and sincerity – get the Hell over it. I am up here for the next fifteen minutes or so and can say pretty much whatever I want.

By the way, President Perry, who was responsible for this decision? It had to be a committee decision. You know what a committee is, don't you? It is an organism with 12 legs and no brain. Didn't they know the kind of speech I defend on a daily basis? I am likely to say

almost anything. I feel a bit like a 16-year-old who has just been handed the keys to Dad's convertible. So my being up here is a bit like watching a baby handle a loaded revolver. You can't bear to watch, but you can't look away, either. Now that image has changed the vibe in the room, hasn't it? A little suspenseful now, isn't it?

But I promise to be on my best behavior – well, as good as it gets – and will try to say something suitable to this happy occasion. First, though, I want to say a few words to the parents of today's graduates. Come on now – I come from the Baby Boom generation, and I suspect many or most your parents do as well. So you know this was going to start out being about us.

For the parents out there, I commend you for providing all of the support that made it possible for your son or daughter to reach this milestone. Your role in their accomplishment deserves recognition.

This includes not just financial support, but also the emotional and moral support needed to get your student – now graduate – to this point in life.

And if you have managed to get to this important day without having that awkward discussion about whether or not you smoked pot when you were in college, you *really* have my deepest and most sincere admiration.

And I wish you a good conversation with your graduate over dinner this evening.

I went to Eastern in the mid-1970s when current events were dominated by the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, and the resignation of an American president. So when I moved to Washington to start law school several years later it would be fair to say I was pretty cynical about politics. Looking back, after living and working in Washington for the past 30 years or so, it is more accurate to say my cynicism back then was just uninformed. It's not that I was wrong; it's that I wasn't as knowledgeable as I am now about the reasons I was right.

As with most things, no one put it better than Mark Twain when he said “sometimes I wonder whether the world is run by smart people who are putting us on or morons who really mean it.” At this point, how many of you would choose the “smart people” option? Anyone? Twain also said, “suppose I were an idiot. Now, suppose I were a member of Congress – but I repeat myself.” You can never go wrong quoting Mark Twain. Or bashing Congress.

It has been said that the American system of government, with its checks and balances and its focus on limited power and protection for individual rights, was a system designed by geniuses so that it could be run by idiots. That maxim is really being put to the test these days, given how the federal government is performing. With the spectacle of the chronic inability to address the budget crisis in a serious way and the increasing polarization of the political system, it is little wonder that Congress now has an approval rating that ranges from 9 to 12 percent.

And this is an election year, so we all get to witness the democratic process in action . . . endlessly, it seems. Journalist H.L. Mencken aptly described elections as the advance auction of

stolen goods, and suggested that if a politician found he had cannibals among his constituents, he would promise them missionaries for dinner. I have seen nothing in this election cycle that suggests Mencken was wrong. These days, no matter how cynical I get, I find I just can't keep up.

Now, I take issue with those who say being cynical is necessarily a bad thing. I disagree, for example, with Oscar Wilde's definition of a cynic as "a person who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing." Rather, I believe a cynic is a person who understands that the currency of our ideals always runs the risk of being devalued by imperfect reality.

In other words, I think of a cynic as a disappointed idealist – a person who sees how things should be, but who understands that all too often our leaders and institutions fall short of their bright promise. That is why Ambrose Bierce defined a cynic as "a blackguard whose faulty vision sees things as they are, not how they ought to be." Writer Lillian Hellman called cynicism just "an unpleasant way of saying the truth."

OK, so far I've been able to string together a number of fairly memorable quotes. That's one way to tell I received an education – I can repeat the words of famous people who actually had something to say. Now, if I can manage put together some words of my own that are worth remembering then perhaps it shows I actually learned something along the way.

I realize that so far what I've had to say might sound just a bit . . . negative. But I really don't mean for it to be. Cynicism – or perhaps skepticism is a better word – is not the same thing as pessimism. I believe each of us can strive to be a better person and we can work toward making a better community and a better nation.

But that effort cannot really begin without first seeing how things really are. The challenge is make sure the knowledge of how things are doesn't blur the vision of what they could be. Knowing what needs to be changed is the reason we try to make things better. And that's where you come in.

It is at this point the typical graduation speaker goes on and on about problems of the world and how our generation screwed things up, and how it is up to you to fix it. But that is not what I am here to say. Oh, sure, there is no shortage of problems, and you will have no choice but to grapple with them. But that really doesn't set you apart from anyone else.

Each generation faces its own challenges. And we don't get to choose the era into which we are born. My parent's generation – what Tom Brokaw calls "the greatest generation" – coped with the Great Depression and World War II and transformed the United States into the leading industrial power on earth.

My generation – the Baby Boomers – were told we had it easy. It was said we were spoiled by the permissive teachings of Dr. Benjamin Spock, and we were soft and self-absorbed. But is this accurate? Well, maybe a little. But we dealt with the civil rights movement, Vietnam, and a growing disillusionment with most forms of authority.

The fact is, I don't think we screwed things up. We dealt with life as it came at us, and we will leave behind a world that in many ways is far better than the one we were born into. We

also will leave behind some immense problems and challenges. Each generation before us did the same.

One of the biggest challenges you will face is the product of our success. We now live in the world of *The Jetsons* – we have pretty much everything but the flying cars. And we have things that weren't even imagined in the early 60s when *The Jetsons* was made – we have instant access to information on a global scale, personalized to the individual; a world of personal connections that has toppled authoritarian governments and undermined powerful industries that once were described as monopolies. We also have short little attention spans to match the deluge of information, but that's another issue.

Of course there is no shortage of problems, ranging from the environment and the economy to the eternal conflict between reason and superstition. Successive generations have faced such things before in one form or another. But perhaps the biggest challenge really is the result of our success. It is the fact that you will live in a world of constant and accelerating change, in which settled expectations are a thing of the past.

But you will deal with life as it comes at you – just as we have done.

As you do so, here is one thing I am not skeptical about: the American Dream. I know it sounds quaint. A cynic might say that dreams are like rainbows – only idiots chase them. This is beginning to sound like a drinking game, isn't it? Like I am trying to set a record for the most times the word “idiot” is used in a commencement speech.

But seriously, I believe each of us has the potential to achieve our dreams, as we define them. And that is what today's celebration is really about.

There has been quite a lot written about this topic since the recession gripped the United States right around the time you were starting your college careers. Many have wondered whether the American Dream is still achievable – whether even trying to attain it is realistic.

Here again, to address that question requires that we define our terms. Just what is the American Dream, anyway? It can mean different things to different people, but in recent years it has become confused with simple consumerism.

I remember reading a survey a number of years ago where American and Japanese students were asked to define the American Dream. Most of the American students said it meant being able to strike it rich, or to buy a big home, or to become famous. The Japanese students, on the other hand, said the American Dream meant that a person's fate was not determined by where he or she came from, that it meant being able to control your own destiny, and having the opportunity to succeed on your own terms.

I was struck by how the Japanese students in this survey got it right and the American students missed the point.

The concept has been explored by many writers since the founding of this country, but the term “American Dream” was coined by historian James Truslow Adams in 1931 in his book

The Epic of America. And while the idea is related to the possibility of prosperity, that's not really what it is about. As Adams wrote:

It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.

Those who currently raise doubts about the American Dream for your generation point to the sagging economy and the brutal job market. They ask whether you will have the same opportunities as your parents. These are serious questions, and they are not wrong about the challenges ahead of you.

But, like the American students in the survey, they fail to grasp the essence of what the American Dream is about. Keep in mind, the term “American Dream” was coined at the height of the Great Depression, in a year when unemployment in the United States reached sixteen percent – almost twice what it is now. Two years later, unemployment would reach almost twenty-five percent. And it would not be long before the nation was engulfed in a world war – a conflict in which the outcome was far from certain.

Needless to say, if the American Dream could survive times like that, it is still alive today. Not only is it alive, it is strengthened by the size of the challenges you face. Easy times aren't often remembered as times of great accomplishment. Greatness is what comes from confronting and overcoming challenges.

In saying that I don't mean to suggest that achieving the American Dream means you have to change the world or win a world war. It can mean that, but it certainly doesn't have to. What it means is living your life and defining success based on your own terms. Maybe your dream involves seeking financial success and notoriety, and maybe it involves leading a quiet life and raising a family. Maybe it means devoting your life to teaching, or opening a restaurant, or coming up with the next big idea, like Google or Twitter.

The point is, success is measured in how you define it, not anyone else. The American Dream is the promise that the goals you set for yourself are not determined by what your parents did (or by what they want you to be), or where you come from, or by your race or your gender. That's the promise anyway.

Will achieving your goals be harder because of one or more of those circumstances over which you have no control? Sure it will, but that's life. What matters is what you do with the parts of your life over which you *do* have control. The American dream is your *individual* dream – and you should not be afraid to dream big.

When I was sitting where you are now, I could not have imagined having the career I've had, or having the opportunity to work on the types of cases, I have done. More importantly I couldn't have imagined actually making a difference in trying to preserve our constitutional heritage. And I also could not have imagined the importance of building a life with someone I love and raising a family. It is important to remember that dreams come in many forms.

This reminds me of an interview I did with Burl Ives for the Times Courier here at Eastern after his 1976 Parents Weekend concert. As I am sure you know, Burl Ives was another EIU alum – well, he wasn't a graduate really, since he left school after two years. One rumor has it he was kicked out for being caught in the women's dormitory – but he told me that story isn't true – not in particulars, anyway. After leaving Charleston Ives went on to achieve fame and fortune as a singer and as an Academy Award winning actor. I asked him about the nature of success and he grew very reflective. He said, "success is many things to many people." He talked about his brother Artie, a retired mailman in Newton, Illinois as "much more successful than I."

After all, success is what you define it to be. It all depends on your dreams.

So, here you all are at the end of your undergraduate careers. But it's really just the beginning of everything else, and that is an exciting place to be. For that reason, in many ways I envy you. You are all just getting started on the adventure of your own lives after college – a journey where it will be your hands on the steering wheel. Perhaps for the first time.

I imagine you are itching to get started. But not just yet. The purpose of commencement is to stop and reflect on your accomplishments thus far. This is a special occasion when you can gather with friends, family, and your professors in a public celebration of your educational achievements.

I expect you will come to appreciate this kind of thing more with the passage of time. Trust me: the four years you have spent at Eastern – or, in my case, five – will stand out as an exceptionally important part of your life. There are very few times when you have a chance to reflect on, and savor what you have accomplished. It is even more rare to be able to share events like this with so many friends and family members all in one gathering.

So enjoy this day. You've earned it. Take it easy. Hug your parents. Get a little drunk, if that's how you celebrate. The parents have to go to bed sometime . . .

And then starting tomorrow . . . go pursue your dreams.