

Remarks by Paul Tagliabue
Commissioner, National Football League
at
Georgetown University
Senior Class Convocation
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Thank you,, and congratulations, everyone!

President DeGioia, distinguished members of the faculty and administration, parents and friends, and graduates.

It's always a joy to come back to Georgetown. I arrived here in 1958 on a basketball scholarship, back when Georgetown basketball was not exactly played at today's talent levels.

It's been more than four decades, and I guess some of you are thinking that I haven't traveled very far since I left here in 1962 —
...all the way from the basketball court ... to the football field!

Actually, it's been quite an adventure — and it's far from over.

My four years on this campus began a process of personal transformation that has never stopped.

I was the first in my family to go away to college. It was heady stuff to do so on a Jesuit campus, with gothic architecture and in the nation's capital.

Coming here, I was very excited about both my academic prospects and my basketball prospects.

I quickly learned that life inevitably requires making choices and setting priorities.

Over the objection of the admissions staff and everyone else who could read a high school transcript, I had insisted that I wanted to major in math. So I was admitted to Georgetown as a math major – no doubt partly because I was a hot basketball recruit.

My first math mid-term exams were a disaster. That was a shock to me. The admissions staff had been right. By my second semester, I was headed to linguistics, philosophy or political science.

It was a real learning experience: expect adversity in life and always be prepared to recommit your talents to create new opportunities.

By my junior year, my love for basketball was losing out to my love for the library. I was more interested in debating communism and democracy with the political science faculty than in shooting baskets. Many of my professors had emigrated here from behind the Iron Curtain, and they had so much to teach me.

In my senior year, my most memorable basketball game was in Madison Square Garden. It's memorable because I missed it to participate as a finalist in the Rhodes Scholarship competition.

I didn't win the Rhodes, but I did land a full academic scholarship in a special inter-disciplinary program at NYU Law School.

See what I mean when I say that my four years here began to transform my life?

So here we are. You're graduating and I'm retiring! And we're all wondering what's next!

That's an exciting place to be in life. Especially when you're moving into the next stage of your life, armed with the fine education we have all received at Georgetown.

As you know, I've been very fortunate to have had several careers for about four decades – as lawyer and chief executive – in the remarkable business of football.

These decades have seen dramatic changes in professional sports. An explosion of leagues and teams in many different sports. Professional leagues for outstanding female athletes. The globalization of athletic competition.

But as dramatic as the changes have been, the pace of change and diversity is accelerating around the world. In America, it's being driven by sweeping demographic change and technological innovations, including the internet and digital revolutions.

This is really the crux of my message: this diversity and accelerating change in professional sports is only a microcosm of the world that you are entering.

In the years ahead, how you and your generation deal with change, and the pace of change — how you deal with diversity and human differences around the globe — these will profoundly shape your life, and the life of our nation and the world in this new century.

As the world shrinks, you will come face to face with competing cultures, faiths, traditions, economies and political systems. Your challenge will be to create the future with hope and vision — with willingness to embrace difference and innovation — not to retreat in fear or with a reactionary clinging to the status quo.

You have been grounded by this University in the intellectual and spiritual traditions of the Western Enlightenment and Christian, Islamic and Jewish beliefs and values. I hope you have also encountered the great traditions of the East in your work here.

At their best, our Western traditions teach us two fundamental habits of the heart:

First, to seek our common humanity and the values we share with those who differ from us, while staying fully connected to our own roots in family, friends, faith and community.

Second, to expect difference and change, and to welcome them with openness, founded on ever-deepening knowledge of ourselves and others.

To follow this path, it's essential that we continue the life of the mind throughout our lives.

Georgetown is where you and I seriously began developing this life.

Don't ever let it stop growing. Whatever field you're in, whatever endeavor you undertake, you will need it.

Today, you have only begun to know and understand the complex philosophical, cultural, economic, political, and religious forces that have shaped your life and the world up to this point.

For the rest of your life, you'll have many opportunities to deepen your knowledge of your own heritage and values, often by engaging with people who are different from you. Use those opportunities. Never stop being curious about the world.

Pursue multiple and varied careers – in government, in not-for-profits, in law or academia, in business. And you'll be amazed how your varied careers will serve as a seamless learning journey.

That has been my experience.

At Georgetown, I learned a lot about the human condition and world affairs from books and professors. That changed when I left here.

In the spring of 1962, I graduated from this place.

My parents' way of saying thanks to me for a job well done was to send me on a trip. So that August, I went to Europe. I was in Germany for the first anniversary of the creation of the Berlin Wall. That was a stake in the heart of Germany designed to secure the Soviets' division of Germany and Europe.

As I look back, my visit at the Wall was the start of a series of memorable encounters with history in the making.

One year after my visit in Berlin, President Kennedy – who had inspired all of us at Georgetown during his 1960 campaign -- spoke in Berlin about what that wall meant — and how despicable it was for citizens in East Europe's Communist countries to be denied their freedom.

He spoke of the universal quest for freedom:

"You live in a defended island of freedom,
but your life is part of the main.
So let me ask you... to lift your eyes beyond the dangers of today,
to the hopes of tomorrow, ...
to the advance of freedom everywhere,
beyond the wall to the day of peace and justice,
beyond yourselves and ourselves
to all mankind."

Addressing the world beyond Berlin, President Kennedy responded to post-war change — not with fear, but with openness and dedication to the values of free societies.

Fast forward to 1989.

In November of 1989, I became the Commissioner of the National Football League. In that same week, the Berlin Wall came down and the people of Germany intensified their quest for freedom.

To celebrate the Wall's demise we considered playing an NFL game in Berlin's Olympic Stadium in the summer of 1990.

Here I was, in another phase of my life, again encountering Berlin.

But wait. How could the NFL play in a stadium built by Hitler for the 1936 Olympics?

How could we have two NFL teams play in the venue where Hitler celebrated the supposed superiority of the Aryan people?

We couldn't — not without fully understanding the history and weighing the competing values.

In fact, in Berlin's Olympic Stadium in 1936, the great African-American sprinter Jesse Owens demonstrated that Hitler's theories of racism and ethnic superiority were bunk. So we played the game to celebrate Jesse Owens' victory for human rights and our common humanity.

Fast forward to 2006.

We now have an NFL league in Europe with five teams in Germany. As a result, I was recently honored to be part of a small, private meeting with the new Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel.

That meeting completed my circle of experiences with freedom in Central Europe, dating back to my first visit to the Berlin Wall 44 years ago, less than three months after my graduation from Georgetown.

Chancellor Merkel grew up in the former East Germany, as a Protestant and a physicist. Having lived in a totalitarian state, she knows the meaning of freedom in a way most of us will never experience. The collapse of the Berlin Wall allowed her to rise to a position of leadership in a free democratic society.

As I listened to Chancellor Merkel, I realized that we were in the presence of a leader with courage of conviction like President Kennedy. Despite their markedly different backgrounds, Chancellor Merkel – like Kennedy – is passionate about freedom and responding to new conditions with confidence, openness, and a deep understanding of both Western and other values.

Many of you will now pursue personal journeys of your own. As you do, I hope that your generation in America and elsewhere in Europe will learn to understand each other. Will you get to know each other? Or will you let differences over economic policies, the war in Iraq or human rights change and harden what we and the people of other nations think of each other?

Be curious and probing. Find out for yourselves whether Western Europe is now an “old Europe” with whom we have little in common, or an experienced Europe from whom we can learn a lot. Engage with your peers in European countries – both West and East – where our traditions are rooted.

And keep an eye on Angela Merkel and other emerging leaders who can be common heroes for your generation of Americans and Europeans. In my generation, we shared President Kennedy and West Berlin's Mayor Willy Brandt. In your generation, will you share Chancellor Merkel, Lech Walesa, Vaclav Havel and others who have pursued freedom and our common values.

There's another aspect to this business of looking outward, being open to differences and unafraid of change. It has to do with the great societies and religions of the Middle East and Asia, the emerging economic and political powerhouses of China and India, and the pace of global change.

As a business leader, it had become clear to me even before the horrors of 9/11, that those of us in the West needed to deepen our understanding of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Taoism and the values we all share, whatever our faith or culture.

In my day, the emphasis at Georgetown was on Western faiths, culture and history, largely Christianity, Islam and Judaism. I am grateful for having been grounded in that tradition.

Because of that gratitude, my relationship with Georgetown didn't end with graduation. This school will always be part of your life. Stay connected to it. America needs universities like this one. You can help Georgetown evolve as the world evolves.

Georgetown's leaders recognize that the College I knew in the '60s would no longer meet the needs of today's world. Scholarship today must bridge East and West.

That's the belief that motivated my wife Chan and me to endow a Professorship in Interfaith and Intercultural Studies a few years ago. And we

are thrilled to see the University's leaders run with this idea by developing an entire curriculum across the spectrum of the University.

It's great to see new programs like the "*Building Bridges*" Conference organized with the Archbishop of Canterbury... like scholarly panels on "*Religion and Politics*"... and assessments of Islam in western democracies.

After traveling in Japan and China recently, I'm more certain than ever that we Americans need to engage in more interfaith, intercultural study and dialogue.

Your generation – and mine – needs to immerse itself in Asia. That's one reason Chan and I will be traveling to Bhutan and India this fall – and why we are looking hard at living in China sometime in the near future, maybe associated with a university or other organization.

You know, many of us tend to think we're so different from the Chinese. And we certainly are in many respects. But in some very fundamental ways, we may soon be finding more similarities than differences. What are they, how do we identify them, and will our similarities develop into common interests?

Last spring, Chan and I traveled in China with an NFL group, including an Eagles all-pro player, Chad Lewis. Chad has lived in Asia and is fluent in Mandarin, so he helped explain American football to the school administrators, mayors and others we met in Shanghai and Beijing. We had a great experience, speaking at middle schools, parents' meetings and universities.

When I spoke about football, the Chinese were not shy about telling me that they thought our game represents the worst of American values: violence and unfettered competition at the expense of others. Their values, they told

me, are all about collective interests, teamwork, support for comrades and non-violence.

"On the contrary," I explained. "Football isn't about violence. It's about dealing with adversity. It is a metaphor for life's challenges. It's all about commitment, work ethic, common goals pursued both individually and through teamwork."

They were fascinated. As we talked more, we both discovered that in sports, we have more in common with each other than either of us realized.

Along with their touted non-violent sport, table tennis, the Chinese thrive on Tai Kwan Do. They're as passionate about it as we are about football. And guess what. It's all about learning to deal with adversity -- pushing athletes in structured, physical competition to their physical and psychological limits.

You should see the equipment! Helmets, chest pads and arm braces that look like something the Green Bay Packers would wear. Taken straight from NFL locker rooms!

My point is, hidden beneath the differences of culture and decades of little dialogue or contact, we share the most basic interests and human impulses, including the impulse to test our limits and those of our colleagues in competitive sports.

That's not to say that our societies and nations don't have deep and abiding differences. We certainly do.

During our visit, we also met with many media and business leaders as well as government officials, including China's Foreign Minister, Li Zhaoxing. In earlier careers, he was a literature professor, Shakespeare scholar, and poet who has held senior positions at the Chinese embassy here in Washington.

In his office, Minister Li opened our eyes to aspects of China that resonated close to home. He gave us gifts, several books, one on Pandas for my grandchildren, and a volume of his own poetry. In leafing through this volume, we found one intriguing poem composed by Minister Li that had been inspired by his conversations with close American friends at the Sam Clemens Museum in Hartford, Connecticut. The poem recalls the Minister's experiences as a boy with his grandmother on her farm in China and relates them to the experiences of "the honest and lovable little boy Huckleberry Finn...."

Ping pong. Tai Kwan Do. Capitalism parading as socialism. A burgeoning middle class in coastal provinces. Poverty and unrest in rural areas. A cultured and sensitive Shakespeare scholar and diplomat who reads Mark Twain and knows Huck Finn. I ask you which is the real China?

I guess they could ask the same question about us. Red states, blue states. Christians, Jews, Muslims. Liberals, conservatives. Blacks, whites, Hispanics, Asians, immigrants from all over the world. Gays, straights. Which is the real America?

The real America and the real China are ever-changing at some levels and ever-constant at other levels. And how our society connects with theirs — or doesn't — will shape the century to come.

How we deal with the vast array of human differences in our own country and around the world — how we face the inevitable changes of a shrinking globe — will test our strength and challenge our capacity to work for the common good.

Will we seek connection based on our common humanity, or will we turn our backs on the core teaching of all the great faiths — that the world's people are one?

Georgetown has provided you with a firm foundation of knowledge and skill with which to delve into questions such as these. Use it. Develop it.

Georgetown will continue to provide leadership and resources to enable Americans and others from around the globe to provide well-grounded and balanced perspectives on questions such as these.

Support Georgetown when it does so and participate in these efforts.

I've talked a lot today about freedom, and I should conclude now by letting you all go free to enjoy the rest of this very special weekend.

But first a concluding thought.

Martin Luther King – one of my generation's most inspiring leaders – was jailed in Birmingham, Alabama, in the spring of 1963 for his leadership in pursuing justice and equal rights for African-Americans. In a letter from this Birmingham jail, King emphasized the universality of the quest for freedom and justice. He wrote:

"I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states... Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

In the 21st century, this “interrelatedness” is far deeper, swifter and broader, so you too are tied together in a single garment of destiny – with billions of others.

You are going forth now into a world of unimaginable openness and change and diversity. Hold tightly to a never-ending quest for knowledge, understanding and tolerance – across continents, cultures, faiths and other differences – and it will serve you well.

That should be your game plan, as we say in football. Now it’s up to each of us to participate fully, to lead and to ensure continued human progress in the new 21st century global environment.

Today, more than ever, the world needs your gifts, your values, your integrity, and your willingness to explore.

The world needs your confident conviction when certainty is called for, and it needs your confident skepticism when new insights are called for.

You have my best wishes and sincere congratulations.