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Remarks at the Hampton University Commencement Ceremony in Hampton, Virginia

May 12, 1991

President Harvey, Senator Warner, and Congressman Bateman, and members of the university administration, and especially the class of 1991. May I thank the class president, Carvel Lewis, for his remarks; pay my respects to the faculty, and to Mr. Dillard and this magnificent choir. My first exposure to music at Hampton was in the year either 1935 or 1936, when one of your predecessor singing groups came to Eastern schools. And this is a magnificent tradition of Hampton. And let me say to those who graduated 50 years ago, you don't look so old to me. [*Laughter*]

One of the pleasures of coming here is getting to know your university president better. You know, President Harvey is an avid tennis player. Really avid. When I shook his hand he corrected my grip. [*Laughter*] At any rate, it's a real pleasure to join with you today. I'm the ninth President to visit your campus, and I might say that eight of them have been Republicans. [*Laughter*]

Hampton is an elite institution. It boasts the largest endowment of any historically black college or university in the United States. Its graduates contribute daily to our national progress and national well-being. Patricia Stevens Funderburk, Hampton '71, whom you honor today, serves in our Department of Health and Human Services. Patricia, congratulations to you for this fine award.

As President Harvey said and Carvel said, you all will make your marks in the world. And today I'd like to talk about the new world that you will enter, a world no longer divided by superpower confrontation but engaged in economic competition and international cooperation.

You in this magnificent Hampton Roads area understand this world better than most. More than 100 firms in this region conduct business beyond our borders. And when many of you leave this university, you'll look to distant shores, places where you hope to spread American ingenuity—your ingenuity.

You ought to be excited about your opportunities. I know that I am. We stand on the verge—if you look around the world you'll understand this—we stand on the verge of a new age of freedom. If we build upon our strengths, if we join hands as a people, we will build a nation and a future unlike any ever seen in human history.

Our first and greatest strength, of course, is our intelligence, and our greatest tool for developing that strength is our educational system. But we have to be honest with ourselves: Contrary to your tradition of excellence, our educational system as a whole has slipped in recent years. Test scores continue to fall. Dropout rates soar in many of our school systems. Businesses complain that some high school graduates don't have the basic reading, writing, or math skills. And meanwhile, our elementary and high school students don't compare well to those in other industrial countries in math, science, and even in American geography.

We've got to do better. We ought to improve our schools the old-fashioned way through commitment and competition. Our America 2000 strategy tries to make a quality education available to every child and every citizen who wants to learn. We have challenged Americans to reinvent the American school—not to improve it but to reinvent it—not by turning the task over to experts in Washington but by inviting a nationwide competition to create better schools.

The concept of choice—letting parents choose schools for their children—plays a role. Its time has come. Polls show that 62 percent of the American public favor choice, and 72 percent of minority Americans advocate choice in the schools.

This should surprise no one, because choice means hope. It lets children from poor neighborhoods enroll in the same schools as our children from wealthier ones. It gives parents the freedom to find good schools for their sons and daughters. It frees

students from the tyranny of inadequate education.

We've encouraged communities and businesses to roll up their sleeves and help—communities, by taking on crime and hunger and other disturbances that make it almost impossible to learn; businesses, by contributing expertise to local schools and by developing education programs at the workplace. You've set a great example right here with Hampton Harbor. You've built a successful commercial residential area, and you're turning the profits into student scholarships.

We remain committed to such programs as Head Start, which help prepare young students for school. It works. As long as I'm President, it will be adequately funded, and it will keep on working.

The business of education is the business of creating a better world. A good education lets you see possibilities you would never have imagined before, and reach them. But education is also a commitment of labor and love.

I recently got a letter from an Army sergeant serving in Saudi Arabia. He talked about his daughter. And he wrote, ''I am very proud of her and would like for her to know this: I am thinking of her even as I sit in the Gulf, serving my country.'' Nilka Bacilio, who will receive a bachelor of science from the School of Education and Liberal Arts, with honors in therapeutic recreation—your dad says, ''Hi.''

Other parents here have written me, and I want to thank you all. Nothing is more natural, no feeling more fulfilling than having pride in your kids. And when I talk about educational choice or educational reform, I always remember a crucial truth: We can't go anywhere without the support of the people who love us, who believe in us. And if there is any advice I can give today, it is this: Cherish those who give you this kind of lift, and return the favor whenever you can.

Speaking of educational excellence, let me pause now to honor Dinee Riley, who has achieved the highest grade point average of anyone in this class. It is my privilege and honor to hand her her diploma—a biology major, 3.95. What a magnificent record. Dinee, you and your classmates should be proud of your accomplishments. And now comes the challenging part: making use of knowledge once you get out of school.

As a nation, we must give everyone a chance to make full use of their imagination and intelligence. Our administration does this by trying to remove barriers to progress. We want to free people now trapped by self-doubt and despair.

We've put together an ambitious housing reform package. We call it HOPE, which extends the dignity of home ownership to people who live in public housing communities. The idea is simple: Give people assets; give them permanent wealth, not just consumable scraps of paper; offer people independence; don't hold them in the bondage of dependency. HOPE offers an ethic of encouragement. It encourages people to take an active part in building better lives for themselves, for us all.

We must free people who have been held back by barriers of discrimination. This administration will fight discrimination vigorously, because a kinder, gentler nation must not be gentle or kind to those who practice prejudice.

We must free people bound by red tape and unnecessary regulation. Last year, Americans devoted 5.3 billion hours to filling out regulatory paperwork—5.3 billion hours at a cost to the economy of $185 billion; and this can't continue.

We must free people from the specter of punitive taxation, which takes money that might otherwise buy a home, pay for a child's college education, or establish a family nest egg. The controversial budget agreement that we signed last year restrains the growth of Federal spending. It offers hope that workers in the future will be able to spend less time working for their tax collector and more time working for their families.

We must free people to create the next great invention. Our administration repeatedly has sought a cut in the capital gains, a tax on the wealth that you will create. That tax is a tax on ideas, on innovation, on the American dream.

But mainly, we must free ourselves from doubt. We must free ourselves from fear. We can't afford to hide from the rest of the

world by erecting protectionist walls. If we want to learn, we have to compete. If we want to test ourselves, we have to compete. And if we want to take full advantage of all the world's diverse cultures, ideas, and innovations, we have to compete. Our future lies in the world economy.

Last year, exports accounted for 84 percent of our economic growth. Between 1986 and 1990, our exports to the rest of the world increased 73 percent, and exports to our major competitors grew even more: to Germany, 80 percent; Japan, 82 percent; the European Community by 87 percent. We exported $673 billion in goods and services last year.

And our future depends on trade. We've asked Congress to extend the Fast Track trade procedures that Presidents have been able to use since 1974. Without Fast Track, we will have trouble moving forward with critical trade initiatives, including the Uruguay round of the GATT talks, North American free trade agreement, and the Enterprise for the Americas Initiative. Unfortunately, some of the opponents of free trade have resorted to slurs against our Mexican neighbors in the hopes of derailing Fast Track.

I can think of no more revealing contrast between a free-enterprise view of the human community and the protectionist view. Prejudice is usually nothing more than a breed of cowardice. People afraid to test themselves, or to risk challenging their assumptions, hide behind restrictive laws and restrictive walls.

If we want to lead the post-cold war world, we must not build walls of prejudice and doubt. We must involve ourselves in the world around us. We must build ties of mutual interests and affection everywhere. And the same sentiments ought to guide us at home. In the end, prosperity requires trust. You cannot build a business if you spend all your time worrying about being cheated or conned or attacked. True brotherhood represents the key to happiness and growth.

The programs that I've discussed today give every American, rich or poor or middle class, white or black or brown, a fair chance to pursue his or her destiny. And they try to harness the engine of ambition in service to the common good. They do not divide people along race or class lines; they give everyone a shared stake in everyone else's success.

We have a chance to rekindle the kind of optimism that characterized the civil rights movement of the '60s—one in which men and women of all races and backgrounds joined to pursue goals that we all hold dear: opportunity, prosperity, justice, freedom, tolerance.

So, today you assume responsibility for shaping an international commonwealth of freedom. Believe in yourselves. Trust in yourselves. Don't abandon your passion for ideas or causes. Work hard, but serve your community. Attend to the thousands of tiny deeds that constitute a good and decent life; treat yourself well and respect others. Be a Point of Light. Build a truly good society.

To you, and to the friends and especially the families who have supported you over the years, congratulations. Thank you for letting me share in your commencement exercises. And may God bless you and God bless the United States of America.

Note: The President spoke at 10:40 a.m. at Armstrong Field. In his opening remarks, he referred to William R. Harvey, president of the university; Senator John W. Warner; Representative Herbert H. Bateman; Royzell Dillard, director of the university choir; Patricia Funderburk, Director of the Office of Adolescent Pregnancy Programs, Public Health Service; and students Carvel Lewis, Nilka Bacilio, and Dinee Riley.