

Commencement Address: “Your Greatest Challenge.”

I was asked to give the keynote address at the winter Commencement of the University of South Dakota on December 13th, 2008. I was very honored to be asked, especially in that USD is my alma mater where I received my BFA degree back in January 1957, and I readily agreed.

But as I began writing the speech I almost regretted accepting the invitation. I guess I could have reasoned that, as it was with me 51 years ago at my graduation, these young scholars would be too preoccupied to care about what an old man would have to tell them; so perhaps I shouldn't really take it so seriously.

But today's world situation must be addressed, and it would be lying to them not to do so.

What can you tell hopeful young people who are on the outset of a trek into the messed up world that we have left them? With the economy gone to hell in a handbasket, with credit so tight that many of them won't be able to buy a car or a home, and with the job market increasingly dismal, and most of them already in debt for their college education, what can you say to them?

In my bitterness as I wrote, I got to thinking what Dantesque punishment might be meted out to Chairmen, Presidents, and CEOs of those titanic corporations and financial giants – including Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac -- that sank and dragged the national and world economies down in their wake. They should be made to tour the country giving commencement addresses to hopeful young people starting out into the slimy world they created. No such thing will happen, though; these moguls will be slapped on the wrist and allowed to float away on their golden lifeboats. And it is left to people like me to talk to the young graduates.

These young people face a massive, heroic challenge, and they have no time to wallow in the bitterness of victimhood. The following is, in part, what I told them in my speech:

“Honored graduates, some of you -- perhaps most of you – must see the immediate future as much less promising than it was even a year ago. Over the past year, it has become a world in economic disarray, with all the signs of deep and lasting recession. You may feel yourselves victims -- victims to arrogance, greed, and profligacy that has characterized our national economy and, to a great extent, our national politics.

“But I would advise you, if you do feel resentment or bitterness, to turn that into a righteous, healthy rage that will inspire you to do something about it, because much needs to be done.

“It is a greater challenge facing you than that of any generation since WWII. One of USD's most honored graduates, Tom Brokaw, in his best selling book, gave the name “The Greatest Generation” to those men and women of that era who gave their all, many of them their lives, in defense of the world against the grossest forces of evil the world had ever seen. Victorious, they came home after the war, men and women, from battlefields in all continents, and from factories here in America, to put their families and communities back together and rebuild the country.

“Like that great generation, you will be challenged to face the great danger of America’s decline from its lofty perch as the most powerful and the best country on earth.

“You will be asked to help rebuild America. Not only the physical plant, but the spirit of true capitalism -- and not the greedy crap-shoot it has become, and you will be asked to help build the moral structure of the nation, both of which are in a state of decay. We are challenged to rebuild the very foundation of our nation, and to rebuild it firmly on ethics and morals that should hold up and nourish our democracy.

“We have, in essence, a new beginning, with a new President, and a nation that is chastened and, hopefully, ready to repent, reform and rebuild.

“What will President Obama ask of us?

“A hint of that challenge might be found in a campaign talk to the U.S. Conference of Mayors last summer in which President-elect Obama told them: ““Change comes from the bottom up, not from the top down.”” Change does not come from Washington, change comes to Washington.

“He has repeated that challenge several times in his campaign and his election victory statement.

“From the bottom up, that is, to me, the way it should be. And it is a challenge to all of us, so you future leaders need not feel alone, but you should feel part of a great movement forward.

“That’s how it will be from now on for all of us in all of our communities. And that creates great demand for the knowledge and the leadership that you take from this University today.

“In the wake of the destruction of our nation -- this implosion of our economy and our systems, we must restore the importance of honesty, integrity, trust and accountability, and insist on it in government and industry and society in general. The term itself and concept of that most precious thing called ethics, which embraces all these values and virtues, must be instilled in the process of formal education -- our schools and universities.

“And, as we are coming to realize, it is the economic threat to our country as much as terrorism that imperils us, and we must become more and more educated in the concepts and systems of the economy and the financial world.

“In Indian Country, there are programs being initiated by the National Congress of American Indians and the First Nations Financial organization to help tribal governments in their economic and financial literacy. These services are to help them make better decisions on their valuable assets, and to protect them from the ever present rip-off artists who are always trying to take advantage of the tribes’ desperation for jobs for their people.

“Ex Treasury Secretary Pete Peterson recently endowed a new foundation a billion dollars to promote economic education and awareness in America. Recently he and fellow Nebraskan, billionaire Warren Buffett, sponsored the production and distribution of a film called “IOUSA,” which is designed to make clear the grave economic condition of America, and the grave threat

the economy poses to the future of the US, if we do not correct our course.

“As you, honored graduates, take your place in society, I hope you will promote studies of both economics and ethics in your schools, in your communities, and in your governments.

“You have a big challenge ahead of you.”

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Charles E. Trimble, 73, is Oglala Lakota from the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. He was principal founder of the American Indian Press Association in 1970, and served as executive director of the National Congress of American Indians from 1972-78. At the above ceremony he received an honorary doctoral degree. He may be reached at cchuktrim@aol.com.