

DEPAUW UNIVERSITY COMMENCEMENT 2005

Eric Schlosser's Address: "Freedom"

It's a real honor to be this year's commencement speaker at DePauw.

Many of the students here have already heard me give a speech--and I'm flattered and surprised to be asked back to give another one.

Every parent and every graduating senior deserves to feel proud. Today should be a day of celebration and joy. For a few minutes, though, I'd like to raise a serious subject. And I'll try to keep it brief.

Today the Class of 2005 is graduating at a time of war. American soldiers your age are risking their lives far from home.

That war may seem very distant. But it will define the coming years of your life, much like World War II defined the life of my father and his generation.

We are told that America is now fighting on behalf of freedom. That it is our mission to bring democracy to nations long ruled by tyranny and injustice. I have no doubt that the people of Iraq and Afghanistan have more political freedom today than they've had for generations. Spreading democracy throughout the world is a noble aim.

But I worry that this war on behalf of freedom overseas has placed our own freedom in grave jeopardy. Indeed, ordinary Americans are now confronted by vast bureaucracies with unprecedented power over their lives.

Liberals, traditionally, have criticized the power of big business. Conservatives, traditionally, have warned against the dangers of big government. Today both liberals and conservatives have much to fear.

Every sector of the American economy is now controlled by a handful of corporations. You would have to go back a hundred years to find a time when so much power was concentrated in the hands of so few. This kind of power threatens the freedom of workers, farmers, ranchers, consumers, and entrepreneurs.

A century ago, a pro-business Republican president, Teddy Roosevelt, spoke out against the danger of monopolies and concentrated economic power. Fifty years ago, another pro-business Republican, Dwight D. Eisenhower, did the same. One of President Eisenhower's first acts in office was to launch an antitrust prosecution of America's major oil companies. One of his last acts in office was to warn about the danger of America's military-industrial complex.

Today both the Democratic and Republican parties have abandoned the effort to break up monopolies and preserve real competition.

Meanwhile, the federal government has more power today than at any other time in our history--thanks not only to new laws, but also to new technologies. Right now, without probable cause, without any evidence a crime has been committed, without any meaningful judicial review, government agents can obtain your medical and financial records, can search through your home and your office, can eavesdrop on your phone conversations, can read your email--and can do all of these things without ever telling you that they've done it.

I have no problem with the government doing that sort of thing to leading members of al Qaeda. But I have tremendous concern about the government doing that to whomever it wants, without strict judicial oversight and accountability.

We hear a great deal today about the dangers posed by activist federal judges. Much less has been said about the extraordinary power of federal prosecutors. They are the ones really deciding whom to punish and how much punishment to give. In the federal system today, more than 90 percent of the people charged with a crime are persuaded to plead guilty. Their cases never go to trial before a judge or a jury. And prosecutors win the vast majority of cases that do go to trial. When the federal government decides to file charges against you, there's about a 3 percent chance that you'll be found innocent. Given the long prison sentences a prosecutor can demand, the pressure to cut a deal and plead guilty is enormous. Because of that pressure, innocent people are now pleading guilty to spare themselves from incredibly severe punishments.

Today the biggest threat to freedom--not just in the United States, but throughout the world--is fanaticism. Everywhere, fanatics are gaining influence. There's a wonderful book called *The True Believer*. It was written by Eric Hoffer more than half a century ago. It describes the mindset of fanatics, of Nazis and Marxists and religious crusaders who believe that they have unique access to the truth, who believe that the world must be remade in their image.

Reasonable people can disagree, in good faith. But today we are facing a severe shortage of reasonable people. In their place is the true believer. Facts don't matter to the true believer. Other people's views don't matter, either. "The fanatic is mentally cocky," Eric Hoffer pointed out. "At the root of his cockiness is the conviction that life and the universe conform to a simple formula--his formula."

In Congress, bipartisanship has been replaced by bitterness and threats of a "nuclear option." On television and on the radio, the words "traitor", "war criminal", and "anti-American" are used to describe political opponents.

On campus, political correctness and the fear of controversy threaten free speech. Students are being encouraged to spy on their teachers, and legislation on behalf of "academic freedom" promises to bring government monitoring into the classroom. That idea has been tried before--by the Communists in China and the Soviet Union. It didn't improve anyone's education.

At a time when our basic freedoms are endangered, it's good to remember the words of the man most responsible for them. Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence. He wrote the clause on religious freedom for the Virginia constitution. He believed that America's freedom depended on a total separation of church and state. When asked what the Bill of Rights should include, Jefferson said:

"By a declaration of rights, I mean one which shall stipulate freedom of religion, freedom of the press, freedom of commerce against monopolies, trial by jury in all cases, no suspension of habeas corpus, and no standing armies."

If Thomas Jefferson were alive today, I have no doubt some radio talk show host would call him a traitor.

Freedom is never important to the majority in power. It's important to everyone who disagrees with the majority. It's important because the majority often proves to be wrong.

I hope all of you will never hesitate to speak out. And I hope you will always fight for the right of others to speak out, even if you don't like them or their views. We must protect the right to seem stupid, to seem foolish, to seem wrong. Because the truth will finally emerge, not from the mouth of one great leader, but from the conflicting opinions and honest debate of people like you.

The men and women who lived through the Depression and World War II have been called The Greatest Generation. Despite everything, I remain an optimist. I think the greatest generation is yet to come. In fact I may be looking at it right now. I wish every one of you much happiness and courage and success.