



UW-Green Bay
Professor Harvey Kaye's
commencement address was
recently selected for publication by
Vital Speeches of the Day,
'a monthly collection of the
best speeches in the world.'

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

University of Wisconsin-Green Bay
The Weidner Center
Saturday, December 19, 2015



Greetings to our Distinguished Guests!

And thank you to Chancellor Miller for inviting me to deliver this Commencement Address — I am thrilled and honored to accept the commission.

But most importantly, **CONGRATULATIONS** to all of you receiving degrees today!

Whether you took four years or 40, we and your families are not just very proud of you. We also have great expectations both for you and of you. In fact, as you will soon gather from my remarks, I have especially grand expectations.

Traditionally, commencement speakers call on graduates to embrace the future. But I'm going to call on you to do something else: I am going to urge you to embrace the past.

I want you to remember who you are —
I want you to remember who **we** are.

With all due respect to the international students among us — **We are Americans...** And I want you to appreciate what that demands of you — of all of us — in the face of the daunting crises that confront us.

Bluntly put: It is time for you to make history as our greatest generations have made history.

Echoing what President Franklin Roosevelt told my parents' generation in 1936: *I firmly believe that this Generation — your Generation — has a Rendezvous with Destiny.*

True: We do not suffer a Great Depression...

True: We do not confront foreign enemies as powerful as Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan...

AND YET: We do face crises no less challenging.

Think about it....

For the past 40 years we have subordinated the public good to corporate priorities and private greed — And we have seen our industries decline, our infrastructures collapse, and our environment go haywire.

For the past 40 years we have subjected ourselves to ever widening inequalities and ever intensifying insecurities — And we have watched the middle-class erode, politics and public life decay, and democracy surrender to plutocracy.



For the past 40 years we have denied our own democratic impulses and yearnings — And we have witnessed direct, devastating, and too often deadly assaults on the rights of workers, women, and people of color.

But perhaps worst of all, we seem to have forgotten who we are... And doing so has made us fearful — as if we were deer caught in headlights — the headlights of history.

Well, Enough of that! It is time we started remembering.

But we need to do more than remember...

We also need to act: **to act both courageously AND determinedly.**

It is time for you to act as generations of Americans did in the 1770s, the 1860s, and the 1930s and 1940s — not to mention the 1960s.

What did those generations do?

They rejected fear and gave real historical meaning — indeed, historic and transcendent meaning — to our finest ideals and aspirations:

- To Thomas Paine's argument in his revolutionary pamphlet *Common Sense*, that "we have it in our power to begin the world over again"
- To Thomas Jefferson's phrases in the Declaration of Independence, that "all men are created equal... endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights... among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness"
- To the Founders' words in the Preamble to the Constitution: "We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union..."
- To Abraham Lincoln's lines at Gettysburg in 1863 proclaiming "a new birth of freedom" and insisting upon a **"government of the people, by the people, for the people"**
- To Franklin Roosevelt's call in 1941 to create a nation and a world marked by four fundamental freedoms: "Freedom of speech and expression, Freedom of worship, Freedom from want, Freedom from fear"
- And to Martin Luther King Jr.'s pronouncement on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963: "I have a dream..."

Yes, they were terribly flawed generations...

Nonetheless: For all of their faults and failings — For all of the tragedy and irony that marked their lives — And for all of the exploitation and oppression that they failed to bring to an end:

Each of those generations — in all of their marvelous American diversity — found it in themselves to rise up; to deal head on with the daunting challenges they faced; and to make the United States stronger and richer than ever before.

But that's just the half of it.

The most amazing thing about those generations:

The thing that made each of them great —

The thing that made America truly exceptional —

The thing that we sadly have forgotten —

OR, which we have been led to forget —

Is that they actually succeeded in doing all of that **NOT** by giving up or suspending their finest ideals and aspirations... **BUT** by harnessing the powers of democratic government and making America freer, more equal, and more democratic than ever before!

In the 1770s, Americans — both native-born and immigrant — not only fought a war for independence. They also rejected kings and aristocrats and created an historically unprecedented democratic republic.

In the 1860s, farmers, workers, and the slaves themselves not only defeated the traitorous Southern Confederacy and sustained the Union. They also redeemed the Declaration's promise by bringing an end to black bondage.

In the 1930s — in the shadows of the worst economic and social catastrophe in U.S. history — working men and women mobilized.

They not only mobilized to reform government, provide relief, pursue economic recovery, transform the American landscape, and rebuild the nation's public infrastructure. But also, to fight.

They mobilized in labor unions, housewives' campaigns, and civil rights organizations. They mobilized to fight for their rights against the economic royalists, reactionary politicians, and white supremacists who sought to deny them their rights.



And then, in the 1940s, they not only went “All Out!” to beat Fascism — by turning the USA into the Arsenal of Democracy, by creating a military force of 16,000,000 men and women, and by shipping overseas to fight for the Four Freedoms. They also continued to fight for those Four Freedoms at home in the United States.

Moreover, they would not only go on to sustain a Cold War against the Soviet Union, make the United States the most powerful and prosperous nation in human history, and create the American middle class...

But also — when challenged by their own children to live up to the promise for which they had fought — set themselves to trying to do so.

In the course of the 1960s,

- They enacted the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts
- They reformed the nation’s immigration laws to once again make America an “asylum for mankind”
- They expanded Social Security to include Medicare for the elderly and Medicaid for the poor.
- They empowered public employees to organize and bargain collectively.
- They passed laws to make the environment, the marketplace, and the workplace safer for all of us.
- **And** they vastly expanded educational and cultural opportunities for all Americans — which included creating this University: the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, 50 years ago.

Take a moment and consider how we have tragically failed to sustain their hard-fought-for legacy of both prosperity and political, social, and industrial democracy...

Whether you are a liberal or a conservative, you surely can see that the time has come — **that the time has come** to act as the greatest Americans of the past have acted in the face of mortal crises.

That the time has come to harness the powers of government and dramatically — **indeed, radically** — enhance American democratic life.

As our greatest democratic poet Walt Whitman put it: “There must be continual additions to our great experiment of how much liberty society will bear.”

Or even more to the point, as the Progressive journalist Henry Demarest Lloyd wrote in 1900:

“The price of liberty is something more than eternal vigilance. There must also be eternal advance. We can save the rights we have inherited from our fathers only by winning new ones to bequeath our children.”

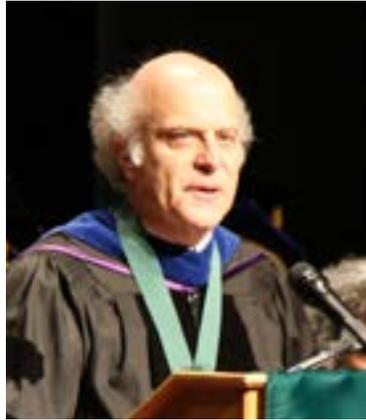
I will repeat that: “*The price of liberty is something more than eternal vigilance. There must also be eternal advance. We can save the rights we have inherited from our fathers only by winning new ones to bequeath our children.*”

So, not just for your sakes, but for the sake of all of us, I urge you to embrace the past — the past you may not readily recall, but which I know you carry in your deepest memory and imagination.

- **EMBRACE AMERICA’S PAST.**
- **REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE.**
- **MAKE AMERICA FREER, MORE EQUAL, AND MORE DEMOCRATIC!!!**

Thank you.





Harvey J. Kaye
Ben & Joyce Rosenberg Professor
Democracy and Justice Studies

Harvey J. Kaye, a University of Wisconsin-Green Bay professor of Democracy and Justice Studies with a national profile as an author, historian, and political analyst, addressed a capacity audience of more than 2,000 students, friends, families, faculty and staff Dec. 19 at UW-Green Bay's commencement ceremony. He urged graduates to do their patriotic part to rediscover American democracy and make the nation "freer, more equal, and more democratic than ever before."

A proud progressive activist, Kaye cited a series of challenges facing America today but said they are hardly unprecedented. "Bluntly put," he advised the graduates, "It is time for you to make history as our greatest generations have made history."

