

From the Oath of the Athenian City State  
Inscribed in the lobby of Maxwell Hall

*We will ever strive for the ideals and sacred things  
of the city, both alone and with many; we will  
unceasingly seek to quicken the sense of public  
duty; we will revere and obey the city's laws; we will  
transmit this city not only less, but greater, better  
and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us.*

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**A More Beautiful City**

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Good morning Maxwell graduates!

I am so honored to be here with you today. I have

never been to Maxwell before so I relied on the sophisticated research skills I gained while serving as a professor at Harvard's Kennedy School. I googled. And the first thing that leaped out at me on the Maxwell website was that you were "consistently ranked" first in the *US News and World Report* rankings in graduate schools. Now being the suspicious type (and a biased former Kennedy School professor), I thought "consistently ranked" might mean "once ranked." So I went to the *US News and World Report* website and there you were, right at the top of the site. BEST PUBLIC AFFAIRS SCHOOL. #1. And I thought, "Dang, no wonder you were able to snag the Deputy Secretary of State." We should have known that you didn't steal one of the hottest power couples in Washington by bragging about the Syracuse weather.

Reading through the convocation program, you graduates give off one overriding impression:

seriousness. You are *serious* people. I was privileged to attend serious schools for college and law school, but it was only here today – minutes ago – that I learned the word “Agglomeration.” Raise your hand if you know what that word means. Show-offs. Ok it just goes to show that one of us does not have a Maxwell degree.

The range of topics captured in the list of dissertations in today’s program speaks to the intellectual diversity of the Maxwell experience – you have in your midst an expert on the causes and consequences of the 1733 slave rebellion in the Virgin Islands, an expert on the effects of oil extraction on indigenous people in Ecuador, an expert on the roots of the women’s movements in Chile and the Czech republic, an expert on Richard Nixon’s track record in controlling illicit substances, an expert on the charitable practices of Lebanese Shia, an expert on how non-governmental organizations react when donors choose new

causes. That's serious.

Maxwell's motto is a moving one, etched into the lobby of Maxwell Hall, and reproduced on today's program. Two lines stand out in particular: "we will unceasingly seek to quicken the sense of public duty;" and "we will transmit this city not only not less, but greater, better, and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us."

Here's the good news. In the United States and around the world there is a thick and durable sense of public duty. All across this country and beyond, in the coming days, there will be people like you getting higher degrees in public policy, public administration, and international affairs. And they aren't getting these degrees because they can't find jobs or don't know what to do next; ok maybe a few of them can't get jobs and don't know what to do next. But most have pursued these higher degrees because they – like you – simply want to be armed with the best possible tools to promote

the public good. They want to develop an A game. And while I know that in a tough job market the other graduates out there can feel like your competitors for scarce opportunities, they are in fact your future teammates and collaborators. I can tell you that the thing you want most when you are fighting the good fight is colleagues who have an A game, those who know the difference between a tight argument and a loose one, between factors that are correlative and those that are consequential.

You are those people and there are an encouraging number similarly motivated. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that the most important division in the world is not between rich and poor, between north and south, between people who believe the Big East should have lived on and those who think it should have died years ago. The world is divided between those focused mainly on their own fates and those who see their fates as tied to others' –

those who are determined to leave the world "greater, better, and more beautiful." In the latter group are those who have that quickening sense of public duty and who refuse to allow the destiny of the metaphorical city – whether a school, a neighborhood, a non-profit, a government, a business, or a planet – to be left to chance.

And look at what those people have achieved. I got my graduate degree, a law degree, in 1999. That year, supporting civil unions for LGBT persons was a taboo idea. Today, eleven states have legalized gay marriage, and more will quickly follow.

Around the world there are countless examples of individual dignity prevailing over those who would negate it. In 1999, when the tiny island nation of East Timor voted for independence, the Timorese were savagely attacked and the country was burned to the ground. A UN-led force intervened, and Jose Ramos Horta, the Nobel prize winning exile and crusader for independence, became Prime Minister.

That was inspiring enough. But more recently Ramos-Horta completed his terms in office in East Timor, and took up the job of serving as the UN Secretary General's Envoy to Guinea Bissau, a war-torn, poverty stricken country that he is uniquely positioned to advise.

It is no secret that Ireland, which happens to be the country where I lived until I was nine, suffered centuries of occupation. When I was growing up, the mere mention of the British monarchy drew curses and rage. Yet last year, for the first time, Queen Elizabeth travelled to Ireland to pay her respects. When she did, the country ground to a halt, mesmerized by a royal whom they once ridiculed.

And in Burma, a steel-willed lady emerged from two decades of house arrest and, after a landslide election victory, she took her place in the parliament as the leader of the opposition.

Now all of you may not end up making headline-grabbing change, but look behind each one of these stories. Marriage equality became the signature civil rights issue of our time because of the activism of LGBT persons across this fine land – like those who this year set up the first LGBT chapter at Maxwell. But it also came about because straight people joined them in insisting that equality meant little if it did not mean equality for *everybody*. Look at the New York Senate Republican Roy McDonald, a Vietnam combat vet, who said, in announcing his surprise vote for gay marriage, “I’m tired of Republican-Democrat politics. They can take the job and shove it. I come from a blue-collar background. I’m trying to do the right thing.”

How did East Timor become independent and then go on to lend to the United Nations one of its favorite sons? Mainly thanks to the brave persistence of the Timorese people, but also because taxpayers in countries like the United

States have, year after year, been willing to support the cause of peace far from our shores.

The Queen could receive a hero's welcome in Ireland partly because she was willing to acknowledge the ghosts of the past, but also because the Irish people decided it was time to look beyond their pain.

And Aung San Suu Kyi will rule Burma some day because when the proud people of that country were denied their rights in 1991, they refused to accept the status quo imposed upon them. Aung San Suu Kyi was the symbol and the catalyst for Burma's change, but the Burmese *people* were the force behind it.

The historic events I have described happened because here and around the world people took seriously Louis Brandeis' great notion – "The only title in our democracy superior to that of President is the title of citizen." Leaders may define history,

but it is citizens who make it.

Now the news around the world today is not all good. We are seeing a surge in isolationism. Here in the United States, it is fueled by the economic crisis and the understandable fatigue with recent wars. We are also seeing a palpable cynicism, which starts with mistrust in government, but which quickly becomes a lack of trust in all institutions and in all efforts to make the world better. What's more disturbing still is that insularity and mistrust are increasingly accompanied by people's refusal to believe facts that do not conform to their ideological predispositions. In short, there are growing signs that we – all of us – have started cherry-picking facts we find convenient and that we have stopped learning. So, how do you -- with your determination to leave the city "greater, better, and more beautiful" – break through all this and make the difference you came to Maxwell in order to make?

I have three suggestions.

**First, know something about something.** Martha Gellhorn, the legendary war correspondent, used to say “citizenship is a tough occupation.” It is tough to be a responsible citizen. And it is tougher still to be an effective one. Those who succeed in making “a ding in the world” – as Steve Jobs memorably put it -- do not bring one size fits all solutions. They know every crevice, every pore, every pot hole in the city they seek to mend. They have a tool box bursting at the seams – maybe they speak a language, they know the economic history of a place, they’ve read everything there is to read, they have gone deep. The enemy of impact is superficiality. Though there are exceptions out there, very few of us can make a difference if we are spread thin. Knowing something about something means knowing you can’t know everything. If you know only a little about a lot, the city will likely look the same after you’re done.

Knowing something about something is also a balm to ideology. The least attractive and least effective approach to problem-solving is what's called "motivated reasoning." You know where you want to add up ideologically so you filter out information that doesn't get you there. Daniel Moynihan, one of the spirits who inhabits Maxwell, was famous for never letting ideology get in the way. He once said harshly, "The liberal project began to fail when it began to lie." He argued that on some issues progressives had stopped asking hard questions, stopped testing original assumptions to see whether they still held, started dodging inconvenient facts and hard truths. Knowing something about something requires more than technical mastery; it requires an open mind.

My second tip is my favorite: **never, ever, ever compare your insides to somebody else's outsides.** Let me draw on Daniel Moynihan again. Many of you know that he was one of the greatest

legislators, thinkers, and statesmen in American history. What you probably do not know is that he was often wracked with self-doubt. He was offered an academic job at the University of Chicago but didn't think he could handle it. He wrote in his journal "I am not their equal...were I to settle among them they would find it out, and...I would know they had and that would make it a waste for everyone." Now, if you had seen Moynihan in action in the Senate, at the UN, or here at Maxwell, you would have seen a man brimming with conviction and self-confidence; but you would have been seeing only his outsides.

My best friend John Prendergast, the great human rights advocate, and I call our heads "bat-caves" -- yes, from Batman. Because we are in our heads so often that sometimes it is hard to concentrate with all the bats swarming around. I'll tell you a little story from government. Soon after candidate Obama won in November 2008, I was offered my

dream job. To serve President Barack Obama and to help him implement his vision for multilateral affairs, human rights, and the prevention of mass atrocity – from the White House. As they say, OMG. When I arrived in Washington with my campaign teammates, I was no newer to my job than many of my peers, but they had purposeful, directed strides while I staggered around, bewildered by the bureaucracy. I hadn't been there long, when I had my first meeting with President Obama in the Oval Office. Since my office was not far away, I left myself 5 minutes to get there. The only trouble was I couldn't find the Oval. Nobody passed out maps of the West Wing, so I had printed out a small map from the *Washington Post* website, but it wasn't drawn to scale and I ended up on the third floor when the Oval – which is tough to miss – was on the second. By the time I found my way, I was late. To my first meeting with President Obama. Seven months pregnant at the time, I was also breathless

and discombobulated. When I walked in, the National Security Adviser and deputy national security adviser were already seated. I sat down awkwardly, setting down the water bottle that every pregnant woman keeps nearby and trying to catch my breath before I had to start briefing.

Unfortunately, as soon as my battered Poland springs bottle touched the surface of the centuries-old coffee table, an aide reached over my shoulder and removed the unsanitary item from view of the 44th President of the United States.

Now at the time I thought this was a truly exceptional experience, but it turns out that every single one of my colleagues has told me a version of the story I have just told you (maybe minus the pregnancy flourishes) . When you get out into the real world, it is easy to believe that you – and only you – are the one who doesn't belong. When you join the Environmental Protection Agency, when you take the foreign service exam, when you return

to your country to start your own business, when you walk into a philanthropist's office and make a pitch to raise money to launch your new NGO, and you feel unsafe -- while everyone else seems to be sure of themselves -- remember you see only their outsides. There could be a fleet of bats inside. Maybe that understanding will inspire not only a degree of calmness, but also a compassion for others – every one of you out there has a back story and, probably, a Bat Cave.

And my third and last bit of advice is the most important. **Make sure to get a life.** I recently left the White House after four long years. I had given birth to two children while working seven days a week at the National Security Council and I was eager to spend real time with them. I got to witness and to work on amazing events in those four years. On President Obama's direction, the United States launched a formidable anti-corruption initiative called the Open Government Partnership, we

successfully pressed for the creation of the new country of South Sudan, we supported the historic democratic change in Burma, and we intervened to prevent a massacre in Libya.

As I cleaned out my office and filed my emails, however, what moved me most were not the fact sheets and the artifacts of the real world history that President Obama and his team helped to shape; it was the post-it notes and e-mails that I had received from my husband Cass Sunstein, who worked around the hall from me -- notes he left on my desk before I gave birth in April 2009 (my water broke during the president's remarks on Holocaust Remembrance Day), notes he emailed me after the President delivered rousing addresses before the UN General Assembly, notes he sent me the weekend Qadhafi fell, or notes he texted me as I insisted on blackberrying on Middle East Peace issues as my contractions for my second child began to make it difficult to type.

My point here is simple: changing the world is hard. Most of the time, one doesn't get exactly what one wants. That's part of the deal. But having the right people in your corner is game changing. People with whom you can share the grimy details of the day-to-day, who will listen when the city seems to be getting not "better and more beautiful" but worse and more tear-stained. You have those people in your corner today – they are here celebrating you. But try not to forget that, as important as it is to share moments like this that appear on the highlight reel, it is even more important to have corner-men and corner-women on the occasions you are pushing water up hill or your faith is wavering.

I wish you well, Maxwell graduates. The city that awaits your care has wonderful qualities, but it is in some ways a bit of a fixer-upper. You have all it takes to be the change you seek – you have the quickened sense of public duty, you have the

knowledge and the practical tools, you have the bat spray, and – most important of all – you have the co-conspirators, friends and family members who will have your backs on the occasions when history doesn't bend your way.

We are counting on you, and all of us here today thank you in advance for the more beautiful city that we *know* you will leave behind.

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