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Text of Zakaria's Commencement address

'We live in an age of progress'

Thursday, May 24, 2012



Jon Chase/Harvard Staff Photographer

Fareed Zakaria addressed the Harvard Alumni Association during the Afternoon Exercises at Harvard's 361st Commencement.

“We live in an age of progress”

Commencement address by Fareed Zakaria [as prepared]

May 24, 2012

Thank you so much, President Faust, Fellows of the Corporation, Overseers, Ladies and Gentlemen, and graduates.

To the graduates in particular, I have to tell you, you're way ahead of me already. I never made it to my commencement, either from college or graduate school. I went to college south of here, in a small town called New Haven, Connecticut. And, well, I celebrated a bit the night before the ceremony. The honest truth is, I slept through much of my commencement. Then, after I had finally made it to Harvard for graduate school, I took a job before I had finished my Ph.D., and wrote the final chapters while

working in New York. I couldn't get away from work for Commencement, and I got my degree in the mail. So, 19 years later, it is a great honor to receive, in person, a Harvard degree.

Harvard was, for me, a revelation. Contrary to the conventional wisdom on this campus, it is possible to receive a fine education at Yale, and I did. But Harvard's great graduate programs have an ambition, energy, and range that, for me, made it a dazzling, electric experience. Getting a Ph.D. involves many hours of grueling work, but, if you do it right, also many hours of goofing off with friends, acquiring new hobbies and interests, and working your way through the great resources here — from the libraries to cafes. I fully availed myself of these opportunities, and the time spent not working (in a formal sense) was as valuable as the hours in seminar rooms. I learned from students, faculty, and visitors. Harvard is really where I learned to think, and I owe this University a deep debt of gratitude, as most of you do as well — something the University will remind you of from time to time.

I have always been wary of making commencement speeches because I don't think of myself as old enough to have any real wisdom to impart on such an august occasion. I'd like to think I'm still vaguely post-graduate. But there's nothing like having kids to remind me of how deeply uncool I am. So I accept this task, with some trepidation. The best commencement speech I ever read was by the humorist Art Buchwald. He was brief, saying simply, "Remember, we are leaving you a perfect world. Don't screw it up."

You are not going to hear that message much these days. Instead, you're likely to hear that we are living through grim economic times, that the graduates are entering the slowest recovery since the Great Depression. The worries are not just economic. Ever since 9/11, we have lived in an age of terror, and our lives remain altered by the fears of future attacks and a future of new threats and dangers. Then there are larger concerns that you hear about: The Earth is warming; we're running out of water and other vital resources; we have a billion people on the globe trapped in terrible poverty. So, I want to sketch out for you, perhaps with a little bit of historical context, the world as I see it.

The world we live in is, first of all, at peace — profoundly at peace. The richest countries of the world are not in geopolitical competition with one another, fighting wars, proxy wars, or even engaging in arms races or "cold wars." This is a historical rarity. You would have to go back hundreds of years to find a similar period of great

power peace. I know that you watch a bomb going off in Afghanistan or hear of a terror plot in this country and think we live in dangerous times. But here is the data. The number of people who have died as a result of war, civil war, and, yes, terrorism, is down 50 percent this decade from the 1990s. It is down 75 percent from the preceding five decades, the decades of the Cold War, and it is, of course, down 99 percent from the decade before that, which is World War II. Steven Pinker says that we are living in the most peaceful times in human history, and he must be right because he is a Harvard professor.

The political stability we have experienced has allowed the creation of a single global economic system, in which countries around the world are participating and flourishing. In 1980, the number of countries that were growing at 4 percent a year — robust growth — was around 60. By 2007, it had doubled. Even now, after the financial crisis, that number is more than 80. Even in the current period of slow growth, keep in mind that the global economy as a whole will grow 10 to 20 percent faster this decade than it did a decade ago, 60 percent faster than it did two decades ago, and five times as fast as it did three decades ago.

The result: The United Nations estimates that poverty has been reduced more in the past 50 years than in the previous 500 years. And much of that reduction has taken place in the last 20 years. The average Chinese person is 10 times richer than he or she was 50 years ago — and lives for 25 years longer. Life expectancy across the world has risen dramatically. We gain five hours of life expectancy every day — without even exercising! A third of all the babies born in the developed world this year will live to be 100.

All this is because of rising standards of living, hygiene, and, of course, medicine. Atul Gawande, a Harvard professor who is also a practicing surgeon, and who also writes about medicine for *The New Yorker*, writes about a 19th century operation in which the surgeon was trying to amputate his patient's leg. He succeeded — at that — but accidentally amputated his assistant's finger as well. Both died of sepsis, and an onlooker died of shock. It is the only known medical procedure to have a 300 percent fatality rate. We've come a long way.

To understand the astonishing age of progress we are living in, you just look at the cellphones in your pockets. (Many of you have them out and were already looking at them. Don't think I can't see you.) Your cellphones have more computing power than the Apollo space capsule. That capsule couldn't even Tweet! So just imagine the

opportunities that lie ahead. Moore's Law — that computing power doubles every 18 months while costs halve — may be slowing down in the world of computers, but it is accelerating in other fields. The human genome is being sequenced at a pace faster than Moore's Law. A "Third Industrial Revolution," involving material science and the customization of manufacturing, is yet in its infancy. And all these fields are beginning to intersect and produce new opportunities that we cannot really foresee.

The good news goes on. Look at the number of college graduates globally. It has risen fourfold in the last four decades for men, but it has risen sevenfold for women. I believe that the empowerment of women, whether in a village in Africa or a boardroom in America, is good for the world. If you are wondering whether women are in fact smarter than men, the evidence now is overwhelming: yes. My favorite example of this is a study done over the last 25 years in which it found that female representatives in the House of Congress were able to bring back \$49 million more in federal grants than their male counterparts. So it turns out women are better than men even at pork-barrel spending. We can look forward to a world enriched and ennobled by women's voices.

Now you might listen to me and say "This is all wonderful for the world at large, but what does this mean for America?" Well, for America and for most places, peace and broader prosperity — "the rise of the rest" — means more opportunities. I remind you that this is a country that still has the largest and most dynamic economy in the world, that dominates the age of technology, that hosts hundreds of the world's greatest companies, that houses its largest, deepest capital markets, and that has almost all of the world's greatest universities. There is no equivalent of Harvard in China or India, nor will there be one for decades, perhaps longer.

The United States is also a vital society. It is the only country in the industrialized world that is demographically vibrant. We add 3,000,000 people to the country every year. That itself is a powerful life force, and it is made stronger by the fact that so many of these people are immigrants. They — I should say we — come to this country with aspirations, with hunger, with drive, with determination, and with a fierce love for America. By 2050, America will have a better demographic profile than China. This country has its problems, but I would rather have America's problems than most any other place in the world.

When I tell you that we live in an age of progress, I am not urging complacency — far from it. We have had daunting challenges over the last 100 years: a depression, two

world wars, a Cold War, 9/11, and global economic crisis. But we have overcome them by our response. Human action and human achievement have managed to tackle terrible problems.

We forget our successes. In 2009, the H1N1 virus broke out in Mexico. Now, if you looked back at the trajectory of these kinds of viruses, it is quite conceivable this one would have spread like the Asian flu in 1957 or 1968, in which 4,000,000 people died. But this time, the Mexican health authorities identified the problem early, shared the information with the WHO, learned best practices fast, tracked down where the outbreak began, quarantined people, and vaccinated others. The country went on a full-scale alert, banning any large gatherings. In a Catholic country, you couldn't go to church for three Sundays. Perhaps more importantly, you couldn't go to soccer matches either. The result was that the virus was contained, to the point where, three months later, people wondered what the big fuss was and asked if we had all overreacted. We didn't overreact; we reacted, we responded, and we solved the problem.

There are other examples. In the 12 months following the economic peak in 2008, industrial production fell by as much as it did in the first year of the depression. Equity prices and global trade fell more. Yet this time, no Great Depression followed. Why? Because of the coordinated actions of governments around the world. 9/11 did not usher in an age of terrorism, with al-Qaida going from strength to strength. Why? Because countries cooperated in fighting them and other terror groups, with considerable success. When we can come together, when we cooperate, when we put aside petty differences, the results are astounding.

So, when we look at the problems we face — economic crises, terrorism, climate change, resource scarcity — keep in mind that these problems are real, but also that the human reaction and response to them will also be real. We can more easily map out the big problem than the thousands of individual actions governments, firms, organizations, and people will take that will constitute the solution.

In a sense, I'm betting on the graduates in this great audience. I believe that your actions will have consequences. Your efforts will make a difference.

And turning to the graduates, I know I am expected to provide some advice at a commencement. Should you go into nanotechnology or bioengineering? What are the industries of the future? Honestly, I have no idea. But one thing I do know is that human beings will reward and honor those talents of heart and mind they have always

honored for thousands of years: intelligence, hard work, discipline, courage, loyalty and, perhaps above all, love and a generosity of spirit. Those are the qualities that, at the end of the day, make you live a great life, one that is rewarded by the outside world, and a good life, one that is rewarded only by those who know you best. These are the virtues that people honor, that they built statues for 5,000 years ago. Well, nobody builds statues anymore. They build weird, modernist sculptures with strange pieces of metal falling off of them, but you get my idea. Trust yourself; you know what you should do. You know the kind of life you should live. You don't need an ethics course to know what you shouldn't do. Just trust in your instincts, be true to them, and you will make for yourself a great and a good life. And, in doing so, you will change the world.

I said that at my age I don't feel competent to give you much advice, but I will give you one last piece of wisdom that comes with age. For all of you who are graduating students or, really, anyone who is still young, trust me. You cannot possibly understand the love that your parents have for you until you have children of your own. Once you have your own kids, their strange behavior will suddenly make sense. But don't wait that long. On this day of all days, give them a hug, and tell them that you love them.

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, and to the graduates of Harvard University's Class of 2012, Godspeed.