

When I graduated from college, almost fifty years ago, the war in Vietnam was heating up and the Civil Rights Movement was raging. Students were protesting for change inspired, in part, by the legacy of the late President, John F. Kennedy, who had challenged Americans in his Inaugural speech to:

“Let the word go forth from this time and place...that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans...”¹

What did protest look like? It was the burning of draft cards and campus rallies across the nation in opposition to the Vietnam War. It was joining the civil rights movement and riding the freedom buses to Mississippi to help with voter registration in African American communities. It was questioning authority, particularly campus administrations and the government. And the country changed because of that protest and the war ended.

And Today, once again we are engaged in a war - the war on terrorism - and we are also engaged in what I believe is a new civil rights movement – call it Civil Rights II or maybe III or IV.

We have made some progress in some areas since the 1960s. The rights movements of Women, and those who identify as LGBTQ have resulted in some important legislation that has made discrimination based on sex or sexual preferences illegal in most states. While we have advanced, clearly we are far from achieving the goal of equality. The events of this past year, from Ferguson to Baltimore, remind us that we have yet to conquer the underlying racism in this country, despite the civil rights movement of the 1960s. We must consider the obstacles-- police misconduct and worse, polarizing politics—as opportunities for our involvement.

Here are some opportunities for your involvement:

- To deal with racism in open discussions within and across communities.
- To work on the lingering effects of poverty resulting from the redlining of neighborhoods, urban decay and economic blight.
- To reverse the destruction of family and community caused by the higher incidence of incarceration of black males for minor crimes.
- To reinstate and expand programs that will ensure equality of opportunity for everyone: from preschool and k-12, to neighborhood centers, and prisons.

And finally:

- To stop the drain on higher education, because in any form, college, community college, vocational training: the key to improvement and advancement is an educated society.

¹ John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address, 1/20/1961.

If we are to reverse the widening disparity between groups of Americans, whether because of their beliefs, their races, religions or their incomes, it is through access to quality education at all levels.

This past year on campus, we have had dialogue concerning the meaning of our tag, “Think Wide Open.” We have had significant opportunities to expand and improve upon what *Think Wide Open* really means. Those of you who have spoken out on this campus seized that opportunity. You made us a stronger and a more open campus – more true to our THINK WIDE OPEN philosophy. You can do the same in the outside world.

So on your Commencement Day I challenge you. Now it is your turn to take the torch. You must seize the torch and seize an opportunity for improvement. Create a vision of what you want for yourself. Set your intent – couple your vision with passion so you achieve your goal. Focus on that which will help you attain your vision. Choose one of these opportunities or some other significant national opportunity for improvement and make it your own to work on while you pursue your vision for your career, your family, your future.

-Vote

-Join an organization or a political party

-Speak out for what you believe.

The other day, I listened to one of our seniors, Brittany Henry, who spoke about transforming obstacles into opportunity. Here is her message:

“We cannot become negative products of our circumstances. It’s a choice that we have to make. Refuse to become a negative product of our environment and choose to move forward positively.” ... “Be your biggest fan. We need these failures so that we can work harder for ourselves. There is nothing like having that motivation for something that is hard to get, because soon something instinctual kicks in and creates this unstoppable drive.”

Good advice for all of us.

Let me end with another Kennedy quote, this one from Senator Ted Kennedy who said, at the funeral of his brother Robert in 1968:

“The future does not belong to those who are content with today, apathetic toward common problems and their fellow man alike, timid and fearful in the face of new ideas and bold projects. Rather, it will belong to those who can blend vision, reason and courage in a personal commitment to the ideals and great enterprises of American Society... Our answer is to rely on youth – not a time of life but a state of mind, a temper of the will, a quality of the imagination, a predominance of courage over timidity, of the appetite for adventure over the love of ease. The cruelties and

obstacles of this swiftly changing planet will not yield to obsolete dogmas and outworn slogans. They cannot be moved by those who cling to a present that is already dying, who prefer the illusion of security to the excitement and danger that come with even the most peaceful progress....”²

I challenge you again – TAKE THE TORCH as the new generation, seize on the significant opportunities we have to improve this nation as you have done for our college. You, and the nation will be better for it.

Thank you and God Bless You.

² Kennedy, Edward M. “Tribute to Senator Robert F. Kennedy.” Address Presented at St. Patrick’s Cathedral, New York City. 8 Jun. 1968. Retrieved 8 May 2008, from the John. F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum website at: <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/Archives/Reference+Desk/Speeches/EMK/>