Janet Napolitano

Pomona College Commencement 2010

May 16, 2010

Well, thank you very much. It is indeed an honor to be here. Thank you, President Oxtoby, trustees, faculty, students. Congratulations to the class of 2010! And to the family and the friends who have helped you get here.

It is an honor to be at Pomona College and to be among the first to congratulate all of you graduating today for your achievement. It is no small matter to make it through college successfully, especially from such an excellent institution. It takes a lot of hard work. It takes a lot of late-night pizza. It takes a lot of support and encouragement. So please, let's take a moment to congratulate your families and friends who are here today and who helped you to get here.

I came to honor your achievement of finishing your college education, but I hope all of you see today not as an end but as a beginning. After all, the word "commencement" literally means the start of something big. So take a little time to let the accomplishment set in. Your parents need this time as well. They need to rest. They need to be proud of you. Maybe throw a graduation party. And of course, they need to celebrate that tuition bills have stopped coming in the mail.

But now, it's time for all of you to get back to work, to commence your lifelong learning, to apply your skills and talents toward making our world a better place...and to begin making payments to the Pomona Alumni Association.

Now I know I am speaking with you today as Americans debate some important and passionately contested issues. As Professor Worthington noted in his kind introduction and as we see here--and hear here--on campus, around this community and indeed around the country, the issue of immigration is again part of our national dialogue. I have worked on these issues for years, and I have seen this happen again and again. How punting immigration reform from one year to the next, from Congress to Congress, from administration to administration, only makes the problem worse.

And while today is not a day to debate policy, I do want to share with you my firm belief that the status quo is simply unacceptable. We all recognize that the current system is not working, that our immigration laws need to change. Our nation needs immigration reform that works for all elements of our society.

We are a nation of immigrants. We are also a nation of laws. So we are committed, I am committed, to working together toward a comprehensive reform that gives us an immigration system that both respects our historic tradition and fits the demands of the 21st century. And as with so many things, this is easier said than done.

I know. I have been in this issue since 1993. I have walked our borders, ridden them, flown them. I know almost every inch of them like the back of my hand. I have helped pass laws and

I have vetoed laws, but as the old Nike ad says, at the national level, it is time for us to "Just Do It."

Now, this isn't just a time of fervent debate across our country. It's also a time when public trust in our government is near record lows. And so here I am, a government official, two out of 50, I guess, offering advice when people feel anxious, even angry, about the economy and about their government. Indeed, this might seem a time when the advice of experts and policy makers might strike you as being part of the problem, rather than being part of the solution.

Now this anger and cynicism isn't really new. The history and classics majors here who have taken classes with Professor Chinn or Professor Lear surely know that there is an old tale that is relevant. They might recall the ancient Greek poet Aesop, the one whose fables parents still read to their children. Now Aesop was ahead of his time when he said, and I quote, "We hang the petty thieves and appoint the great ones to public office."

Twenty-five centuries later the American author and journalist Ambrose Bierce defined politics as "a strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles."

And recently, you've surely seen individuals willing to play on these kinds of anxieties and stereotypes. But when he spoke to graduates a few weeks back at the University of Michigan, President Obama reminded us that democracy in a nation of 300 million has always been noisy and messy. It's always been contentious and complicated.

So don't believe the cynicism or buy the conventional wisdom that somehow American life is all about private gain and not about public good.

Now as the newest graduates of Pomona College, you've been shaped and prepared, not only for personal achievement but also to serve a more common good, to build a more environmentally sustainable future, to create a more fair and just world.

Now, one of the remarkable things about my job, and it is indeed a huge job, is seeing the tremendous displays of resilience and civic spirit around our country. Amid the tragedy and hardship, I also witness the sacrifice and devotion of our first responders, our law enforcement officers and our public servants at every level. I've seen Greensburg, Kansas, which was totally flattened by a tornado. I've seen communities along our Gulf Coast that have come back from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita only now to confront the BP oil spill, the largest such spill in our history. And every time--every time!--there are stories of great strength, of survival and revival, and of resilience. And just because stories about cooperation and collaboration don't boost ratings, we cannot lose sight of the fact that it's not TV producers and talk show hosts who have the finger on the pulse of our nation. It is the thousands of citizens who turn out to help their neighbors and to help total strangers in times of need.

Now, can government do better? Can we become more constructive in empowering families and communities and small businesses and help them thrive in these challenging times. Indeed, we can. And we work toward these goals every day. But here again, the public is ahead of the conventional wisdom. For example, interest in community service programs like AmeriCorps, Citizen Corps and the Peace Corps has never been higher. That's why so many promising graduates like you apply for programs like Teach for America and why last year, my

department received more than 1,000 applications for our DHS Honors Fellowships to fill fewer than 15 slots.

So don't buy the argument that we don't engage each other in person or in groups to better our communities. The need now is greater than ever.

I spoke recently at the 15th anniversary of the Oklahoma City Bombing, a heinous domestic terrorist attack that happened when most of you were probably in the first grade. But even if you don't remember that event, all of you have grown up in an age when the threats and the realities of terrorism have become a part of our national dialogue. So another important reason to reject the cynicism that serves as an excuse to do nothing is that the country needs you.

To remain strong, our nation surely depends on a strong defense. It needs strong diplomacy, and it needs a strong and engaged citizenry. The true bedrock of our nation's strength is its people and the values that we defend and hold dear--freedom, hard work, sacrifice, shared responsibility. And those values are on display every day in communities across the country, communities of every type imaginable. And helping build those communities and keeping them strong and secure is what graduates like you must now do.

Now, in one sense, Pomona has given you powerful tools to tackle these challenges and to embrace the complexity of the world around us, to be comfortable with the fact that much of what we confront defies simple, one-fits-all answers. It's a remarkable thing, this liberal arts education. Maybe you've had a provocative philosophy class or an amazing oceanography professor. In fact, if you sat down, you could probably come up with 47 different ways the Pomona experience has influenced you.

But even beyond a specific knowledge of any one field is the preparation to be able to think critically and independently, to appreciate cultural and historical context, to write and argue forcibly but also respectfully. I call this "practical imagination," and sparking the practical imaginations of young people has been an important element of a liberal education for centuries.

It has never been more important than today, where we live in a world where change is a certainty and where we are challenged to evolve and adapt in myriad ways. Today, technology, communications, society and just about everything else evolve faster than at any point in time. This has given us both greater risk and greater opportunity in life. The anxiety that many people feel can create a sense of disorientation. It comes with feeling that we live in an ever-changing world, the feeling that something is constantly shifting beneath your feet. This is the feeling that change is being done to you and it can make change a frightening thing.

Now I know a little bit about this in my current position because many of our security challenges today emerge from the reality that a changing world produces new enemies and new threats. And when you get a briefing every morning on the new ways that terrorists are trying to kill people by exploiting new technology, global travel and other hallmarks of a changing world, well, it's not the happiest way to start the morning.

But change in our world fulfills a greater role. It challenges us, but it is empowering to us to shape the world according to how we envision it. This isn't change being done to you; this is change being done by you.

So I'll close by coming back to the town of Greensburg, Kansas, that I mentioned earlier, a town most of you have never heard of. I visited Greensburg after that massive tornado that destroyed 95 percent of its standing structures. Change certainly hasn't been done to the people of Greensburg; they refuse to let nature have the last word. Instead, they decided to regroup, to rethink and then to rebuild their town--not the way it was, but as something new, as a national laboratory for environmental friendliness and sustainability, using LEED standards as a hallmark for their new school buildings and their stores. That's the kind of change being done by you.

As graduates, you now have the skills and the sensibility to affect change in your own way. And when President Oxtoby presents you with your diplomas in a few minutes, don't just use them to show the world you're a Pomona graduate. Use them as a license--a license to engage the world, a license to practice positive change, a license to use your practical imagination. All of us will be watching eagerly to see how you use your license, to see how you produce change that's done by you.

Congratulations on the achievement you mark today and thank you for inviting me here.

About Janet Napolitano

Janet Napolitano is the third Secretary of the United States Department of Homeland Security. Prior to joining the administration of President Obama in January 2009, Napolitano served the state of Arizona in several capacities. She was appointed as U.S. Attorney in 1993 by President Clinton, and was elected Attorney General in 1998 and as Governor in 2002. While Governor, Napolitano became the first woman to chair the National Governors Association, where she was instrumental in creating the Public Safety Task Force and the Homeland Security Advisors Council. Time magazine named Napolitano one of the top five U.S. governors in 2005. Napolitano graduated summa cum laude from Santa Clara University in 1979, where she won a Truman Scholarship. She received her Juris Doctor (J.D.) in 1983 from the University of Virginia School of Law. After law school, she served as a law clerk for Judge Mary M. Schroeder of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit before joining the Phoenix law firm of Lewis and Roca. Napolitano is a Monty Python fan, an accomplished hiker who has scaled Mt. Kilimanjaro, and a lifetime member of the Girl Scouts of America.