

# Cameron Munter

## Pomona College Commencement 2012

### May 13, 2012

President Oxtoby, distinguished faculty members, distinguished guests; parents and families; and most of all, students of the class of 2012 at Pomona College:

It's an honor and a pleasure to stand before you today, in Claremont, a town which shall always, for me, present the vision of peace, of harmony, of the world without end. After all, this is where I grew up, spent my childhood, and remember the dappled sunlight of the past. It was a time when the Village Theater and Spaghetti Village and Bentley's Market were the center of my life, the permanent signifiers of meaning in an otherwise changing world ... you tell me there is no longer a Village Theater? You tell me there's no longer a Spaghetti Village? Bentley's went bust long ago?

Yes, but here in Claremont, idyllic Claremont, there are still monuments from my past. Here at Pomona College: look at Big Bridges, that splendid symbol of the majesty of Pomona College, that citadel of learning. Big Bridges stands strong and silent, just as it did when I was valedictorian of Claremont High School in 1972, and spoke under the indoor stars in Big Bridges exactly forty years ago. But of course, that's not what I remember most vividly about Big Bridges. I'd much rather share with you the way we townies showed our respect for your institution. Quick, name the five composers written across the front of the building. Left to right: Wagner, Chopin, Beethoven, Bach, Schubert. Now I ask you: what's Wagner doing up there with those immortals? What's Wagner doing now, other than decomposing? But I digress. My favorite Pomona memory is a few young Claremont High students, stealthy in the dead of night, who, in that wonderful year of 1972, created a Styrofoam replica of a great musician, his name carved in big white capital letters below his stately visage. And those students, who shall remain anonymous, climbed up to the roof of Big Bridges, and placed this stately visage over poor Schubert. It was the visage of Zappa, raised to the pantheon for all the world to see. Frank Zappa, who attended Claremont High, I might add. Pomona College may have had Kris Kristofferson. We had Frank Zappa. Such, you see, that was the impact of this grand institution of higher learning on my development as a scholar and diplomat.

What, you say? Who's Zappa? Who's Kristofferson? For that matter, who's Wagner? What do they teach you guys these days, anyway? I thought Pomona was considered top ten!

When I left Claremont, I studied in the east, and then in Europe. Neither blond nor tanned, I was exiled to places less pleasant, less calm, less mellow than this wonderful setting where you've just completed four years of reflection, deep introspection, exposure to the traditions of science and the arts, and the Friday night kegger in the Wash. Coming from California, where every man or woman can reinvent himself or herself at will, I felt the need to study history, to try to sort and analyze the permanent signifiers of meaning in an otherwise changing world. In fact, I studied so much history that I nearly became an academic before I realized that there was no future in the past. So what does someone like me do in a case like that? One joins that welfare institution for over-educated idealists: the Foreign Service.

Now why do I say idealist? Let me reflect a bit on my diplomatic career to explain.



In my nearly thirty years as a diplomat, I've been fortunate enough to represent the United States of America. In doing so, I don't just carry messages from Washington to other countries, or report on the doings of foreign governments, or dress in the local caftan, lurk in the bazaar, and spread wicked rumors so as to confound our nation's enemies. It's true, of course, that I represent American interests. Tough and hard-nosed interests at times; and if you don't take the "service" part of Foreign Service seriously, this is not a career for you. But one of the great things about serving America overseas is that you get to serve a country that bases its identity not on tribal membership or cultural traditions or a specific language but on a set of values. Imagine a career where you actually get paid to be idealistic.

And if you're idealistic enough, you can succeed. That is, if by success you mean two tours in Iraq becoming acquainted with the sounds of incoming 107mm rockets, getting your embassy burned from under you in Serbia, and working long hours in the dust and monsoon of Pakistan, a country President Obama has told me "keeps him awake at night." But it still pays better than being an adjunct professor.

Let me not mock idealism, because I embrace it. Idealism is not just the quality of believing in the goodness of others and the ability of reasonable people to come to reasonable agreements on very difficult issues, if the will is there. That's what my Mom (Pomona College class of 1947) taught me, anyway. It's more than that: it's believing in the purpose of your work, embodied best by the words of President Kennedy, that God's work on earth must truly be our own. I believe you can make things better, at home and abroad. And I believe that idealism, both in foreign affairs and in any other career, can only sustain itself if it's reinforced, and that reinforcement comes from a second important term: solidarity.

My first overseas assignment as a Foreign Service Officer was in Poland. It's a Poland that no longer exists: communist, martial-law Poland. The good guys – the Solidarity guys -- were underground. They were idealists who believed they could achieve the impossible, to topple a dictatorship. But from these activists, from Lech Walesa to Henryk Wujec, we learned: *nie ma wolnosci bez solidarnosci*: there is no freedom without solidarity. What did they mean? No freedom without solidarity? It's a good question for all you out there, Generation Y or Z or whatever you are: it's not enough to be free, to follow your individual conscience. In the case of the old "bloc" countries, it was not enough to free yourself of dictatorship. You must reach out to others, those unlike you, those less fortunate than you, so that the freedom you win is a freedom you share; or as the Solidarity activists used to say, "for our freedom, and yours."

Yeah, I know. It's ancient history, 1989, back when the all of you sitting here were in the queue, waiting to be born. You tell me I sound like a broken record, speaking of the past?

And besides, do any of you even know what a broken record is? Or was?

But let me tell you: representing American values in communist Poland taught me that we can bring about extraordinary positive change by living by our values, and that we can learn in the process.

From there I went to Czechoslovakia. You remember Czechoslovakia. No, I guess you don't remember Czechoslovakia; you were too busy writing your first thesis on quantum mechanics so you could get into a good kindergarten. Hey, I can barely remember Czechoslovakia myself, although that may have something to do with the quality of beer in that part of the world.



Czechoslovakia broke into two parts shortly after I arrived there in 1992. At that point, I realized something else about the world. It's not just California where people reinvent themselves all the time. Representing American values, I was able to contribute to the process of the reinvention of a state and society whose impressive leader – the former dissident Vaclav Havel – placed idealistic values like decency, respect, and generosity alongside the broader concepts of freedom and equality and justice. To whom did the Czechs look for help? To the Americans, because even if others might see gaps between our ideals and our actions, we still profess them and take them seriously. They respected our ideals. We demonstrated solidarity with the Czechs. They expected nothing less from representatives of America. And the good guys won.

In the following years I was involved in projects that sought to erase the line Stalin had drawn across Europe. The institutions of European unity are very idealistic. And so these countries from the east joined NATO, which is an organization based on the notion that an attack on one is an attack on all, and what could be a better expression of solidarity? They also joined the European Union, an organization based on lofty ideals – well, it seemed like a good idea at the time.

But what happened to the permanent signifiers of meaning in an otherwise changing world? I was evacuated from my desk at the White House on 9/11, pushed out the gate of the Old Executive Office Building. This experience taught me two things. First, that we were witnessing a huge change in the way America would deal with the world; and second, that I was definitely on the B-list since I wasn't taken to the undisclosed location to hang around underground and give advice to Dick Cheney. It's always good to be reminded of your limits, and to remain humble; along with my striving for idealism, my commitment to solidarity, I'd say gaining a little humility is always a good thing too.

If you remember nothing else from my talk today, remember the three words idealism, solidarity, humility.

In recent years, I've left Central Europe. Instead, I've volunteered for service in Iraq, then Serbia, then Iraq again, and now Pakistan. I've done this because those who serve America and its values in rewarding settings (like Central Europe) must also be willing to serve America in more difficult settings. Morally difficult, physically difficult. Do I sound like an idealist? I certainly hope so. So early in 2006 I opened the first Provincial Reconstruction Team in Iraq, in the city of Mosul. During my subsequent tour of duty, friends of mine were killed and wounded, not something I thought I'd experience as a diplomat. I learned not only about Iraq, but ironically, about my own country as well. One night, insurgents briefed the perimeter of our base and killed a number of our colleagues. The next evening I called together the team of military and civilians I commanded, and we discussed safety. They asked me: what kind of gun do you have in your hooch? I said, they didn't issue me a gun. No, no, they said. The gun from home, the one you brought with you. I answered: I don't own a gun in America, and I don't have one here. You don't? They asked. Silence. Then they said: are you a Democrat? I said, let me tell you four things. First, I'm a Democrat. Second, Democrats are patriots too. Third, I even voted for George McGovern, who, incidentally, was a war hero. Fourth, I'm your commanding officer. More silence. Then: what are you doing here?

Now, that was a healthy question in the broad, cosmic sense. But at least my comrades, these loyal red-staters, seemed to know who George McGovern was. What, you say? Who's George McGovern? Parents, are you sure all that tuition was well spent?

But the lesson here was another kind of solidarity: a solidarity for those in the United States itself who have responded, in the decade since 9/11, in different ways than I have; who may have different habits (like, say, guns in their hooches); but who also believe sincerely, just as I do, in the same values and remain committed to the same ideals.

And so in the following years, in Baghdad and Belgrade, I single-handedly oversaw the successful withdrawal from Iraq and single-handedly steered Serbia toward reconciliation with Kosovo and onto the path of membership in the European Union, you know, that European Union that seemed like a good idea at the time. All right, so what was it I was saying about humility? Why this bragging? Well, I just can't help it I guess. I'm a product of Claremont, that oasis in a sea of harsh materialism and strip-malls, that perfect gem of small-town America whose greatest institution – Pomona College – is a beacon of light and hope for this benighted planet. Why can't I be a little too proud now and then? Maybe I should say it right: that I've learned pride in our institutions, pride in the spirit of generosity I still recognize in America, and pride in those fellow citizens – like you – who will live by our shared values in years to come.

But back to humility. In order to teach myself humility once again, I volunteered to come to Pakistan.

Now, Pakistan is a great country. It has a culture entirely based on eating. Fortunately, biryani is very good for you, if taken in moderation. But the main point about food in Pakistan is not how it tastes, but the situation it describes. Pakistanis eat so they can talk. Meals are the setting for discussion. As ambassador, I go to a lot of meals, so I hear a lot of talk, and a lot of discussion. I love the Pakistanis, who preface every sentence by announcing: "I'm no diplomat, and I'm going to be blunt." In this way, they're just like Americans. And, just like Americans, they can be very critical.

Over somosas and tea, the criticism of the United States is that we're arrogant and unfeeling; that we don't appreciate the sacrifice Pakistanis have made fighting terrorism in the last decade; that we like India best; and a host of other grievances that date back decades. I believe this criticism is really based on a Pakistani perception that, in their eyes, America isn't living up to its promise. That is, we talk about freedom – but they complain that innocent Pakistanis aren't free to travel to the United States. That is, we talk about equality, but we somehow love India more than Pakistan. That is, we talk about justice and yet we seem to support ineffective or even corrupt governments. But what are they really saying? They're saying: Pakistan is a country in which many people still believe in the ideals that America purveys, and even if a series of grievances make America unpopular, there's a deep desire to be friends with America, and for America to reemerge in their imagination as a country of ideals, of universal values. These are not criticisms Americans like to hear. And yet, with a little humility, we can learn from these criticisms; with a little solidarity, we commit to work with Pakistan to address issues of people-to-people contact and regional cooperation and good governance; and with a little idealism, we can believe in the future of Pakistan. This doesn't mean unquestioning acceptance of every detail in the Pakistani narrative of grievance and hurt, because Pakistan must take responsibility for its own mistakes as well. But it does mean

defining the success of Pakistani democracy as a success for America. More rice please, and how about passing the dal?

Let's not forget, too, that we're locked in a struggle, a struggle against those who would destroy democratic institutions, stamp out tolerance, and strangle diversity. I like to think that I'm a man of peace. But I want to make the distinction clear. I'm not a pacifist. There are times when you must fight for what you believe. The fight that I've joined is a terrible thing, but it's necessary. And in this fight, Pakistan is not the enemy. Those in Pakistan who believe in democracy and tolerance are our natural allies, and I always prefer to fight alongside my friends; America, Pakistan, and our other friends against a common enemy. My task as a diplomat is not to shy away from a fight. It's to make sure that we win the fight, together with those who share our values.

If these are some of the ideals that Americans and Pakistanis strive to maintain, what's sorely lacking now is the sense of solidarity that like-minded people should have. From the Pakistani viewpoint, it's hard to identify with a country that sent helicopters into its territory without prior notification to nab Osama bin Laden. From the American viewpoint, it's hard to identify with a country in which Osama bin Laden was able to live, undetected, for five years in a town not far from the capital. The mistrust runs deep, on both sides. And there are legitimate reasons for thoughtful Pakistanis to be concerned, if not despairing: the pressure of the war in Afghanistan and the daily threat of terrorism, the weakness of the Pakistani economy, and the extraordinary burden of a looming demographic catastrophe – Pakistan will soon be the fifth most populous state in the world, and over 60 percent of its population is below the age of 25. Meanwhile, many Americans are also unhappy; to quote that great philosopher of the Southland, Randy Newman, “we give them money/but are they grateful?/no they're spiteful/and they're hateful...”

I know, I know. You've never heard of Randy Newman. Thank God for YouTube, today's version of the quaint institution we used to refer to as the “library.”

But in Pakistan, we need to have wise policies, in which American security and economic interests are served; where we take into account changes and opportunities in the region, to the east; where the ongoing fight against terrorism continues strong and effective. That goes without saying. And similarly, we need the Pakistanis to effect necessary economic reforms, fight corruption, continue their fight against militants who challenge the writ of the state within their borders, and work with us in the region, to the west. This is not just a matter of Pakistan doing what we think is right. It's a matter of Pakistan fulfilling its own potential, and America being there to help it do so.

And yet what I've learned as a diplomat is that wise policy, difficult as it might be to conceive and implement, is only part of what's necessary. That wise policy must have an idealistic component, and countries who work together on wise policies must show a sense of solidarity to succeed. These are not qualities you learn when you study the impact of the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 (and I would know, because I used to teach innocent young minds such as yours about the impact of the Peace of Westphalia in 1648).

To get to these ideals, to recognize and act on this solidarity, America and Pakistan would benefit from a little more humility. That, at least, is the lesson I've drawn; and even if I can't force any of these things on my Pakistani counterparts, I can at least do my best to apply them in my own work; to guide the American diplomatic mission in Pakistan by these principles; and

in the toughest of times in foreign policy (and believe me, in Pakistan these days it is truly the toughest of times), to retain the optimism which itself is such an important ingredient in the success of diplomacy. That, I believe, leads to solidarity by example: by decent and ethical behavior, we show every day that we stand ready to follow the lead of decent and ethical Pakistanis who want the same for their country. Thanks for the wonderful meal, my friends, and let's get together and talk again soon.

From this illustration, then, let me return to you, the graduating class of 2012 at Pomona. I urge you to consider, whichever path you choose as you make your way down Indian Hill Boulevard into the mean streets of post-college life after that last French Roast at 42nd Street Bagel, the importance of humility. As a diplomat, I've learned the skill of listening, or at least trying to listen; putting myself in the shoes of someone who thinks differently; and yet not losing my own convictions and beliefs. I've been fortunate enough to be able to apply my learning, as you surely must, to principles such as solidarity, which has helped me grasp just how deep the distance can be between people in terrible and challenging situations, and how those situations cannot be overcome unless solidarity is expressed. And most of all, I've learned that you can go through a lot of experiences you may not have expected, and find that your ideals not only remain intact but also even grow, as they have in my case. I believe more now in our values than I did thirty years ago, and it's probably the greatest gift I've gotten from my career.

I suppose I make this path of mine sound like it was the best of all possible worlds, something along the lines of combination dinner number 7 at Tropical Mexico. Hardly. I've seen a great deal of suffering. I've sometimes felt crushed by the weight of our own bureaucracy. I've ensured, through this nomad existence as a diplomat, that my wife and children have no place they can truly call home. But these challenges are not unique to the Foreign Service. These challenges will find their ways into your lives as well, in varying ways, in varying times. I've tried to cope with those challenges by renewing my faith in ideals, finding common cause with others, and reminding myself I'm not unique – that everyone is finding his or her path. That's where I end up, after all these years so far from Claremont, where I first sought the permanent signifiers of meaning in an otherwise changing world. I found them, in the still winters of the Pripet marshes and on the scarred sands of the Ninewa plains and by the muddy banks of the Indus river. You'll find your own paths, no matter what I say to you today. But may you all benefit, as I believe I have, from the wisdom of ideals, solidarity, and humility in the years to come. Thank you.

## **About Cameron Munter**

Cameron Munter is a long-time diplomat, currently serving as the U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan. Ambassador Munter arrived in Islamabad, Pakistan, on October 26, 2010. He had previously served at the American Embassy in Iraq, first as political-military minister-counselor in 2009 and then as deputy chief of mission for the first half of 2010. In 2006, he led the first Provincial Reconstruction Team in Mosul, Iraq. Before working in the Middle East, he was the deputy chief of mission at the U.S. Embassies in the Czech Republic (2005-07) and Poland (2002-05). He has also served as director for Central Europe at the National Security Council (1999-2001), executive assistant to the Counselor of the Department of State (1998-99), director of the Northern European Initiative (1998), chief of staff in the NATO Enlargement Ratification Office (1997-98), country director for Czechoslovakia at the Department of State (1989-91) and Dean Rusk Fellow at Georgetown University's Institute for the Study of Diplomacy. He has held positions in Bonn, Prague and Warsaw. He received his doctoral

degree in modern European history from the Johns Hopkins University, and was born and raised here in Claremont, California. His mother, Helen-Jeanne, is Pomona Class of 1947.