



## THE WHITE HOUSE

PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH

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### President Bush Delivers Commencement Address at Texas A&M

Texas A&M University  
College Station, Texas

10:36 A.M. CST

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you all. Howdy!

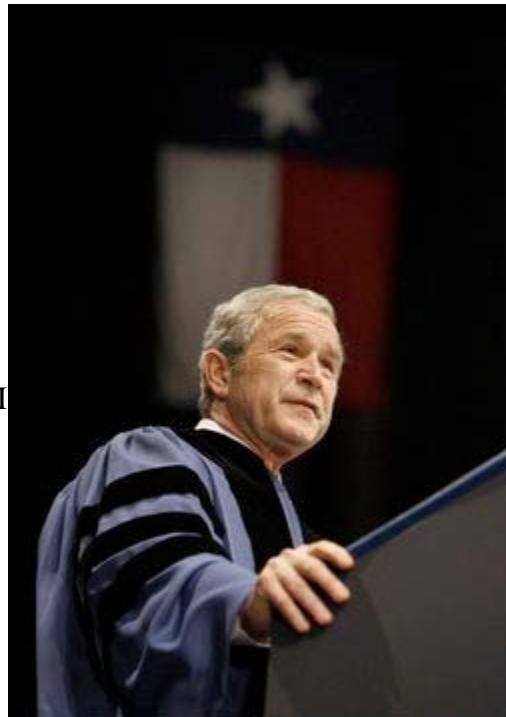
AUDIENCE: Howdy!

THE PRESIDENT: I am thrilled to be back in Aggieland. (Applause.) And it's always an honor to be introduced by the President of the United States -- especially when he's your Dad. And how about Mom? Mom, I've been meaning to say this publicly for a long time -- thanks, thanks for the gray hair. (Laughter.)

I congratulate the graduates of the Fighting Texas Aggie Classes of 2008 -- (applause) -- class of 2007 -- (applause) -- the class of 2006 -- I'd better stop. (Laughter.) Let's just say that I hope there's no one left from when I spoke to the commencement in 1998. (Laughter.) If so, I hope you're walking out of here with a Ph.D. (Laughter.)

I am grateful to the faculty and staff of Texas A&M for their devotion to learning and their example of scholarship. I appreciate your outstanding President, Dr. Elsa Murano. And I am glad to be with -- there you go. (Applause.) And I am glad to travel from Washington today with three fine Aggies representing Texas in the United States Congress -- Congressmen Chet Edwards, Joe Barton, and Jeb Hensarling. (Applause.)

I am pleased to see so many of your families and loved ones here today. While you bled maroon, they bled a lot of green. (Laughter.) So please join me in thanking all those whose support made it possible for you to reach this proud day. (Applause.)



There is one person who wishes he could be here today -- and that's your former President, and America's Secretary of Defense, Bob Gates. (Applause.) You know, he's got an excused absence. It's not like he's over at the Dixie Chicken. (Laughter.) He's traveling to the Middle East, consulting with our generals, and showing his support for the men and women of the United States Armed Forces. (Applause.)

When I asked Bob to be the Secretary of Defense, it was clear how much he loved Texas A&M. After all, he refused to come to Washington until after he attended the winter commencement. And I was even more impressed when he insisted on standing during the Cabinet meetings -- (laughter) -- claiming he was the "12th Man." (Laughter.) One day, he explained it all. He said: "Mr. President, I'm red ass." (Applause.)

I'll say this for A&M -- you've got some mighty fine traditions. (Applause.) Back in my day, I think I would have enjoyed dunking my ring. (Applause.) I would have loved to have taken Laura to "midnight yell." (Applause.) I especially like the traditions around Reveille. Anytime she barks during a class lecture, everyone in the room is dismissed. (Applause.) I wish she had been there for some of those press conferences. (Laughter and applause.)

This campus is home to solemn rituals that demonstrate the strength of your bonds. In playing of Silver Taps to honor fallen classmates, in the reunion of students and alumni to read the roll call at Muster, and in wearing of your timeless rings, you affirm a powerful truth: Once an Aggie, always an Aggie. (Applause.)

Traditions like these are central to the A&M experience. And so is academic excellence, and all of you will benefit from your rigorous courses of study. I suspect you'll also find that some of your most important learning took place outside the classroom -- in the friendships you formed, perspective you gained, and the things you discovered about yourselves. When you leave this campus, you will be well prepared for any endeavor you choose. To those of you who have jobs lined up, I -- congratulations. To those not exactly sure what comes next -- I know how you feel. (Laughter and applause.)



As our days in the White House wind down, we're going through a series of "lasts." I pardoned my last Thanksgiving turkey. Laura decorated for her last Christmas in the White House. And Barney bit his last reporter. (Laughter.) Or at least that's what we hope. (Laughter.)

This is also my last commencement address as President. (Applause.) And it is fitting that it takes place here in Texas, where I have been so blessed over the years. I was raised here by wonderful parents, surrounded by brothers and sisters whose love still sustains me. And Texas is where I went to a backyard barbeque and met a beautiful teacher named Laura Welch. Texas is where our girls were born and our lifelong friends live. And next month, when our time in Washington is done, Texas is where we're coming home. (Applause.)

These days, I'm asked a lot about my time as President. Some days have been happy, some days not

so happy -- every day joyous. It's been a tremendous privilege. I have traveled across our nation, and to 74 countries around the world. I have slept in Buckingham Palace; I have feasted in the desert of Abu Dhabi; I've watched the sunrise in Jerusalem. I have spoken to campaign rallies in packed stadiums, and to hundreds of thousands in Romania's Revolution Square. I've taken Marine One into America's biggest cities, and visited many of our smallest towns. Through it all, nothing has inspired me more than the character of the American people -- the acts of courage and service that sustain our free society, and make this the greatest nation on Earth. (Applause.)

Courage and service are cherished here at A&M, and they are values that I hope will guide you for the years to come. So this morning, I thought I would share a few of the most powerful examples of courage and service that I have witnessed over the past eight years.

No act of courage or service is more impressive than volunteering for the United States military. Eight years ago, a brave 17-year-old named Christian Bagge made that noble choice when he stepped forward to join the Oregon National Guard. In 2005, Christian's unit was on patrol in Iraq when his Humvee hit a roadside bomb. He lost both his legs, and he thought he would lose his life. But with determination and superb medical care, this good man survived.



I met him at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas. He told me he used to be a runner and he planned to run again. I was impressed by his courage, but it was hard to imagine a man with such severe injuries ever being able to run. I said to him offhandedly, you know, when you're ready to run just call me, I'll be glad to run with you -- and moved on.

Well, then one day, a phone call came to the Oval Office. It was Christian. He said, "I'm ready to take you up on your offer, Mr. President." Just five months after I'd seen him in the hospital, he showed up at the White House with legs made of carbon fiber -- and a spirit stronger than steel. Together, we took a lap around the South Lawn. I'll admit, he left his Commander-In-Chief in the dust. (Laughter.) And he left me with great admiration for his unshakable determination, his upbeat spirit, and his inspiring example for all Americans. (Applause.)

People like Christian show the true strength of our military -- and so do the families who support them. Last year in Reno, Nevada, I met an orthopedic surgeon named Bill Krissoff. His son Nathan, a Marine, had given his life in Iraq. Dr. Krissoff told me he wanted to join the Navy Medical Corps in Nathan's honor. I looked at this remarkable man, I said: "How old are you?" He said he was 60 years old. He needed a special waiver to qualify for the Navy. I was thinking I'm 61, so he didn't sound all that old. (Laughter.) I asked his wife what she thought of the whole thing, and she said she supported his decision. So I went back to Washington -- and surprisingly enough, a few days later the waiver came through.

Since then, Dr. Krissoff has undergone extensive training in battlefield medicine. And soon he will deploy to Iraq, where he'll help save the wounded, uphold the legacy of his fallen son, and inspire the United States of America. (Applause.)

Petty Officer Greg Guillory is also in the Navy. But that is not the only way he serves. Greg lost his mother in a car accident at a young age, and his stepmother suffered from a serious drug addiction. Greg earned a four-year scholarship to play college football -- he was a high school player here in the state of Texas. But he turned down that scholarship so he could stay home to help his family confront its problems. Eventually, he decided to join the Navy, where he found a strong and supportive environment.



While stationed in San Diego, Greg met his wife Shonda, who had also endured a painful childhood. Together, they resolved to help children trapped in difficult circumstances, and made the selfless and compassionate decision to become foster parents. They spent a year caring for a 17-year-old who been abused. Then they took in a 14-year-old who had been beaten, then a baby born with drugs in her system, and then a three-year-old whose mother was in jail. Today they are caring for two children, a brother and sister, as well as the baby girl Shonda delivered last month.

And all the while, Greg has been carrying out his duties in uniform. He is stationed at Camp David, Maryland -- and this generous man who has given so much to others feels so grateful himself. During a moving testimony at the Camp David chapel that I was fortunate enough to witness this past Thanksgiving, he said: "I am thankful that God continues to bless me so I can be a blessing for children in need."

America is blessed to have citizens like Greg and Shonda, whose hearts are big enough to share the greatest gift of all -- the gift of love. (Applause.)

Kendrick Kennedy shared that gift, too, after Hurricane Katrina struck his hometown of Biloxi, Mississippi. Even though his own house had been damaged, Kendrick put others first -- helping family members find shelter, and cleaning up debris in neighbors' yards. There's another piece of the story: Kendrick is blind. A few years before the storm, he lost his sight -- and his job. But he refused to let that hold him back. He enrolled at Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College. I met him there when I spoke at his commencement. He went on to the University of Southern Mississippi, where he became the first blind student to graduate summa cum laude. Now he's in law school in Ole Miss. And this good man has set a high goal -- to serve our country as a justice on the Supreme Court. (Applause.)

Other Americans show courage by summoning the hidden strength to overcome their weaknesses. Four years ago, I met Letitia Chavez-Paulette. She had been addicted to drugs; she served time for her mistakes. While in prison, she joined a faith-based program called Celebrate Recovery, and to help turn her life around. When she was released, Letitia was determined to support other women returning to society. So she started a transitional home called "A Peaceful Habitation" -- a name taken from the Book of Isaiah. Here's what Letitia said: "God's grace has kept me going. His love has kept me strong. And my faith is a gift that is helping me help others."

In these stories, we see the courage and service that defined America at its best. And that same spirit has long defined



Texas A&M. It's the spirit of General Earl Rudder, who helped lead the D-Day invasion and served more than a decade as A&M's president. It is the spirit of the Corps of Cadet, which includes nearly 1,800 Aggies. It is the spirit of your ROTC program, which routinely commissions more officers than any school outside the service academies. It's the spirit of the 21 Aggies who've given their lives to keep America safe since September the 11th, 2001 -- a sacrifice that will be honored forever by your "Freedom from Terrorism" memorial.



That same spirit is visible on this campus in many ways beyond the military. A&M is home to "The Big Event" -- the largest student-run community service project in the nation. After Hurricane Ike hit the Texas coast, you welcomed more than 1,600 "Sea Aggies" from A&M's Galveston campus to College Station. And in countless other acts of volunteerism and charity, you have made Texas A&M's name synonymous with service.

On your last day as A&M students, my call to you is to continue this spirit long after you leave the campus. There are so many needs to be met, and so many ways you can help -- from mentoring a child to becoming a teacher, to volunteering to feed the hungry or heal the sick overseas. If you hear the call to service in the military or government, answer it. If you enter the private sector, be proud of contributing to our prosperity -- and give back to your communities. Wherever life leads you, pursue the path of service -- and you will find fulfillment beyond measure.

As you embark on this journey, let me leave you with a few last pieces of advice. First, listen to your mother. (Laughter and applause.) As you can see, Mom is out of the hospital and everything is back to normal. After all, she's still telling me what to do. (Laughter.)

Second, develop a set of principles to live by -- convictions and ideals to guide your course. There will be times when people tell you a different way is more accepted or popular. Remember that popularity is as fleeting as the Texas wind. Character and conscience are as sturdy as the oaks on this campus. If you go home at night, look in the mirror and be satisfied that you have done what is right, you will pass the only test that matters. (Applause.)

And finally, be on the lookout for role models -- people whose conduct you admire and whose paths you can follow. With that in mind, I have one last example of courage and service. It's a story of a young man who left comfort behind to answer his nation's call, became the youngest pilot in the Navy, and nearly gave his life in World War II. When he came back home, he devoted his career to public service, and proved that success in politics can be accomplished with decency and grace. He reached the pinnacle in government, but he defines his life by other roles -- a father who gave unconditional love, a grandfather devoted to his grandchildren, and a beloved husband of the sweetheart he married a lifetime ago. Some of you will leave A&M with a degree that carries this good man's name -- George Bush. I have been blessed and honored to have carried it for 62 years. (Applause.)

I want to thank you. I want to thank you for the opportunity to share this special day with you. I congratulate you. When I leave office next month, I will depart confident in the future of our

country, because I have faith in each of you. I will depart uplifted by the many acts of courage and service that I have witnessed these past eight years. I will depart grateful for the outpouring of support and prayers that have strengthened Laura and me. And I will depart ready to come home to the people I have missed and the place I love -- the state of Texas. (Applause.)

And so, after all this, there is only one thing left to say: Gig'em Aggies! (Applause.)  
Congratulations, and may God bless you. (Applause.)

END 10:29 A.M. CST