

Commencement Address

“The Use of Political Science”

Political Science Graduation
University of California, Berkeley

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May 19, 2008

Good afternoon, Chairman Pierson, faculty members, graduates and parents, relatives and friends. What a glorious afternoon, and a beautiful location in which to recognize you graduates' achievements in completing your demanding studies. A few years ago, you were selected from among many applicants to be admitted to this great university. You have worked hard, with great self-discipline. The purpose of today's ceremony is to recognize your achievements. With your degrees in hand, you have every opportunity to succeed. Congratulations on your accomplishments, and my hopes that you will realize your dreams in the future.

I had the good fortune to know Charles Travers. Together with his wife Louise, they were the couple for whom your Political Science department is named. A successful businessman and a 1932 Cal graduate in political science, Charles passed away two years ago at the age of 95. He was fascinated by politics; a man of strong opinions who always was ready to debate the issues. He was particularly concerned with ethics and the accountability of leaders in society. Charles would be proud of you graduates, and today I speak to you in his spirit and his memory.

I would especially like to congratulate Emilia de Luz and Nathaniel Lipanovich, members of the class of 2008, who have been outstanding Travers Fellows at the Commonwealth Club this year.

You are graduates in political science, as I was for my degrees at Columbia University and as an undergraduate at Occidental College. You have studied American politics, political theory, international relations, comparative politics, statistics, regional studies and more. Today I want to talk with you about the use of this political science you have studied. What does your poli sci degree prepare you to do that is different from those who have studied chemistry or engineering or who haven't been to college at all?

To a great extent, a political science degree today is a general preparation for many different fields, rather than specific training to become a political scientist or politician. A few of you – including those receiving your Ph.Ds and Masters Degrees today – will go on to become professional political scientists. You may teach at a university, or work in government, or be a diplomat or run for public office. And to those of you who have completed this demanding graduate program goes my special admiration. You will contribute importantly in your field and to society in your professional role. The thoughts I am about to share are no doubt already part of your outlook.

But many of you receiving your undergraduate degrees today will not become political scientists. You will embark on careers in business or the media or attend graduate school to pursue the law or another professional field.

So for the majority of you, what then is the utility of the political science degree you have just completed? As someone who is not a practicing political scientist in the traditional sense, let me point out some ways your poli sci training will not only be helpful in your own lives, but also how important your knowledge can be for the good of our society.

The currently popular definition of political science is that it's the study of how power is distributed and exercised in society. But that characterization is too narrow. Studying political science provides one with an independent base of knowledge to understand many aspects of society - how nations behave and interact, how people organize themselves in groups and relate to one another in society. It teaches us how to analyze social problems and issues, to know the range of resources and approaches that are available to deal with society's challenges. It teaches us to understand the nature of good – and bad – leadership in society. So it is much broader than just the study of power.

Even if you do not become a practicing political scientist, your academic work prepares you for a life during which you will have greater insight into events in America and around the world than most of your fellow citizens. Being familiar with historical patterns and how systems of government and politics work, you will be able to see the reasons and agendas behind what is happening; to identify early trends before they become obvious or irreversible.

This type of special insight into politics and public policy is becoming more rare and more valuable in our culture. Why? Because the ability of the American media to report

significant developments to the public has declined dramatically in the past few years, and the trend is likely to continue. This month, Bay Area newspapers reported the shooting of three seals on the beach at San Simeon – as sad as that is – more prominently on their front pages than they at first reported the tens of thousands of deaths from the cyclone in Myanmar. The traditional media has arrived at a strange and sensationalistic approach to reporting the news. The commercial media do not have the financial or human resources for more serious reporting.

Increasingly, those who want to understand what is really happening must piece the picture together – from the internet, from direct observation, from friends and colleagues, from foreign media. The average citizen today doesn't have the time or energy to collect such extensive information, and so is not well informed about the important political and social developments in our society and other parts of the world. They find it difficult to understand why we experience budget deficits, mortgage crises, wars, tax increases, diseases and global warming. And they are less aware of what can be done about these problems than in the past, and thus less empowered to try to solve them.

Because you have been trained to analyze the causes of social and political trends and to understand what solutions could address public policy problems, you will become an increasingly important source of knowledge and insight for your friends and colleagues. You have the independent knowledge and perspective to comprehend significant trends in society.

There are many examples of the ways in which your political science education gives you special insight. For example, when a political advertisement appears – for a ballot measure or a

candidate – an ad that presents an issue or a person in a certain way, you have the training to look beyond its surface. You have the critical intelligence to see behind the ad to understand the intent of those presenting it. You will understand that a group with a generic name like Citizens for Responsible Government, sponsoring such an ad, may actually be the tobacco industry, or the trial lawyers or the nurse’s union. You will see through the spin, look to see who is paying for the ad, and understand their agenda . As a result, you will be well-informed and thoughtful citizens, and you will be able to help your friends and colleagues understand the issues and to be better citizens and voters themselves.

You are the people with the knowledge and critical outlook to ask the right questions if a future president points to the presence of weapons of mass destruction – or some other rationale - to justify the invasion of another country. You know the questions to ask in examining whether the situation is really as it is being portrayed, and what the costs and benefits would be of taking the action that is being recommended and what the outcome of similar ventures in the past has been. By the same token, you will be able to understand the agenda of a terrorist group, and to see through the propaganda and scare tactics they may use to manipulate world public opinion.

You will be able to analyze whether, as two of the current presidential candidates have proposed, a gas tax holiday in the face of rising fuel prices is good public policy. Or, as a third candidate has argued, whether it would further delay the need to move to sustainable sources of energy and modes of transportation.

At a more dramatic level, during some periods in our history, developments in our public policy can endanger our very system of government and society. Only those who understand the reasons our political system is structured the way it is will be able to see those dangers and understand their significance.

Let me mention one trend of this type that is worrisome right now. The US Constitution is being challenged in more different ways today, and on a more fundamental level, than probably at any time in our 230-year history as a nation. Laws and practices, largely stimulated by concerns about terrorism, are testing the Constitution in at least four different areas.

First, the detention of terrorist suspects without charges or the right to legal counsel may conflict with the right of *habeas corpus* guaranteed by the Constitution, as may the practices of water-boarding and other extreme forms of extracting information from suspects.

Second, when the US government compels phone companies to tap the phone lines of US citizens in the hunt for terrorists, this may threaten the right of free speech guaranteed by the first amendment to the Constitution. The Treasury Department's recent action shutting down the internet domains of any website with the word "Cuba" in its title (including literary sites like "Cuba-Hemingway dot com"), because it took such a broad approach, is almost certainly a violation of the first amendment right to free speech.

Third, recent legislation passed by Congress, The John Warner Defense Authorization Act of 2006, would allow the use of the US Armed Forces to restore order in a domestic

emergency. This would appear to violate the *Posse Comitatus* Act, which prohibits our active-duty military forces from conducting law enforcement missions on American soil. The purpose of this act is to protect American citizens from the fate of other countries where a too-powerful military has taken control of government.

And fourth, overarching these constitutional challenges is President Bush's practice of executive exceptions, where he notes in signing legislation that the president need not abide by the laws to which he is affixing his name. President Bush has used these signing statements over 800 times, many times as much as any previous US president. Among the laws for he has registered a presidential exception have been a ban on torture, oversight provisions in the US Patriot Act, whistleblower protections for executive branch employees, safeguards against political interference in federally funded scientific research, and many other restrictions or requirements on his powers. The American Bar Association recently went on record objecting to this wide use of presidential exceptions as a threat to our legal and constitutional system.

Taken together, the danger of these challenges to the Constitution is that measures designed to keep us safe against terrorists today could be used against Americans in the future by a government that wanted to exploit its power and threaten the freedom and well-being of our citizens. As a nation we have always leaned in favor of fewer restrictions on our liberty, even where that might increase the risk that others could exploit the openness of our society. Our founding fathers wisely made that tradeoff in constructing the First Amendment and other key protections of civil liberties in our Constitution.

Unless you are looking for this information about challenges to the Constitution, unless you have the background of understanding the Constitution and its purposes and the historical development of our system of government, it is hard to put all of these separate bits of information and developments together to see the pattern. As you go through life, most of your fellow Americans will not have the same tools you have to recognize these patterns, to see how they fit together, and to understand their importance and possible danger. You have the training and insight to really see what is going on. At times, as perhaps at present, it is crucial to put all these pieces together to see where risks may lie for our country. Your training and perspective allows you to do this.

In your studies, you may have encountered, or even debated, the famous question put to Socrates in Plato's Republic – **quis custodiet ipsos custodes?** Who guards the guardians? Who watches over those who have power, to ensure that power is used wisely and for the well-being of individuals in our society, and not for autocratic rule or to promote the interests of the few?

Beyond relying on your political science training for a deeper comprehension of the political and social developments around you, beyond sharing your insights with your friends and associates, and even beyond teaching and doing research if you become a political scientist, a level of responsibility comes with the insight you now possess. If you see policies and politics taking your community or the nation in the wrong direction, it is now your responsibility to act on what you know. If you do not, only those whose goals are merely have power and to use it will shape the politics and government that affect all of our lives. Left to themselves, they will not always be wise stewards of the public interest.

Plato believed that the “guardians,” the elite ruling class he imagined in his ideal society, could be sufficiently trained in the right values so they could guard themselves. Our American system of governance, based on the concept of citizen involvement in politics and public life, offers a different answer than Plato gave to the question of who watches over those who have power. Over the 230 years of our democratic system, the wisdom of a structure in which the citizens watch over those who have power has been proven again and again.

For those with special insight and knowledge like you, it is not enough to have a successful career. It is your obligation to become involved in community life in some way, at some point in your lives. The more successful and intelligent you are, the greater the need for you to take responsibility for leadership.

Woodrow Wilson was the most famous political scientist to become involved in American public life. With his doctorate from Johns Hopkins, he was an academic expert on the US Congress who became President of Princeton, then governor of New Jersey, then President of the United States. He answered the call to put his knowledge at the service of his country. His training in political science enabled him to not only succeed in getting elected to public office, but once he became president, he successfully passed through Congress innovative laws on which we still rely today. These include the graduated income tax, the establishment of the Federal Reserve and the Federal Trade Commission, child labor laws and establishing the normal work day as eight hours.

As President, Woodrow Wilson was faced with the great challenge of establishing the peace after WW I. His training and knowledge led him to think outside the box to create the League of Nations. While it was not successful in the immediate years after the Great War, this “big idea” - to gather all nations into a problem-solving group - later became the basis for the United Nations. Wilson’s ability to identify the need for an over-arching international organization came from his knowledge of how governments and international politics worked, what they were capable of doing and their limitations, and how a global institution could address international problems that no single nation or smaller group of countries could resolve. Woodrow Wilson’s contributions as President exemplify the ways in which those with independent knowledge about politics and government can contribute to solving the greatest of societies’ problems.

As people with political science training, you need not aim to become president to use your background to good effect. There is insight to be applied, and leadership to be undertaken at all levels, from the local community to the international arena.

As you know from your studies, virtually every issue has a public policy component, where better policies will improve or even save lives. This is obvious in areas like public education, transportation, law enforcement and environmental protection.

But it is equally true in some areas that might not immediately come to mind. Take natural disasters – the hurricanes and earthquakes that are much on our mind after the recent

events in China and Myanmar. Such events are unavoidable, and you might think that public policy can do little about them. But that is not the case.

While the events are inevitable, whether and how people survive them is not. Installing warning systems that allow people enough time to move out of the path of natural disasters, adopting building codes that allow structures to withstand disasters, implementing zoning that prevents buildings from being constructed in areas that are in the path of natural disasters – there are all matters of public policy. Governments, foundations, non-profits, companies and other organizations have a role in improving the ability of communities to withstand natural disasters. Architects, city planners, realtors, builders, geologists, the insurance industry and many other professionals can help to create better public policy in these areas. And better public policy can literally save millions of lives.

So my message to you is that, whether you go on to become a political scientist or pursue any other field, remember that one of our most effective Presidents had political science training. Continue to think like a political scientist. Step up to the responsibility your training brings, be a shaper of public policy, in your local community and beyond.

The answer to Plato's question is that you, more than any other citizens, are the guardians. With your independent base of knowledge and your training, you have the ability to watch over our system of politics and government, and to improve public policy towards a safer and better world.

Thank you, and good luck!